

Up In Our Bedroom

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Up In Our Bedroom

by [stinkycheeseman](#)

Summary

Gale Cleven and John Egan, in the same damn room.

Texas

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gale and Bucky are placed in the same dormitory at flight training.

Everything begins, quite unassumingly.

Gale arrives for the first time in the dead of night, the exhausted victim of a broken down train, and sneaks into the cramped dorm with his duffel in moonlit blue dark.

Two beds. Two desks. Two lamps with chain switches. Plain but neat bed sheets and beige blankets. Not so different from home.

He tries not to wake his roommate as he deposits his things in the closet and strips down to pajamas, but the roommate wakes up anyway, groaning, squinting tired eyes and sleep-squashed hair, and grins at the sight of Gale immediately. His movie star teeth glint even in the dark.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” the guy rasps cheerily. He’s got a wide set of shoulders and arms and no shirt to speak of.

Gale doesn’t know what to say. “Hello,” he responds, at length. “Gale Clevon.”

The guy snorts and leans his cheek against the back of his forearm across the pillow. “—kinda name is *Gale*?”

Gale huffs a laugh of surprise. “A perfectly serviceable one,” he replies. “Better have a hell of a name yourself to follow that up with.”

The guy heaves himself up to stand and tilts his head as if to imply, *Touché*. He’s in just his skivvies and a crucifix, but he’s tall and he holds himself up straight like he’d be just as comfortable in nothing at all. “Bucky Egan,” he says, reaching for a handshake. “Well, John if you’re my mother, but if you are, you look terrible.” He claps Gale on the elbow with his free hand and winks.

Gale gathers himself. Firm grip. Quick nod. Enough of a smile to be polite in the face of this solar flare of personality, blinding folks in the middle of the night.

“Good to meet you, John,” Gale says, cool as he can.

Bucky rears back with a smile; it jumps onto his face sideways like it caught him by surprise. Then, he raises his eyebrows and laughs out, “Same to you, Buck.”

And that starts a whole other conversation.

Bucky Egan’s a lousy roommate.

He smokes out the window. He comes home drunk. He says he can’t sleep with clothes on, so he strips down to his underwear against regulation. Very unfortunately, he’s an amateur at the jacking off etiquette necessary for sharing a bedroom, too loud when he does it and too quiet when Gale does. He doesn’t tuck his bed corners right. He snores.

The first weekend, he invites Gale out with ‘the guys,’ and Gale immediately resigns himself to a night of boredom, discomfort, and possibly even violence, if it comes to it. It’s still a good idea to show his face around socially, no matter if he’ll have to chew his way through a whole box of toothpicks to tolerate it.

As it turns out, he only needs one.

At the bar, Bucky holds court.

He has a friend running to the counter every so often, so that Bucky always has a two-finger whiskey in hand as he tells anecdotes and jokes and tall tales. The myriad of soldier’s faces turn toward him with smiles and laughter and amused disbelief. He asks around for opinions. He calls out specific people by name every so often, to get them in on the raucous laughter and conversation.

Oddly, Gale finds himself just as enthralled as anyone else by the show.

Bucky delegates his role as storyteller after an hour or so, saying, “Get

ready for this one, fellas. Blakeley's about to drive you all nuts. I gotta chat up the ol' roommate."

And as Blakeley starts in on his tale about walking in on their CO in the bathroom, Bucky sidles on over to Gale's spot near the back, raising his eyebrows.

"Buy you a drink, Buck?" he asks. He jerks his head at the bar and starts walking as the table shouts behind him.

Gale gets up to follow, flattered by the attention from everyone's clear favorite, but says, "Don't drink."

Bucky falls back against the bartop in shock. "You don't drink!" he exclaims, clutching proverbial pearls. Then he rights himself. "Darts, then," he says and starts them toward the dart board.

Gale laughs, "Not really my fort  ," still on his heels.

Bucky stops in his tracks. "Alright, so we'll just talk!" he says, laughing too. "How about them Yankees?"

"You're not gonna believe this—" Gale starts.

Bucky smacks his forehead. "Buck, you're killing me!"

Discussing how much he doesn't have in common with other men is usually a sore spot at best, but Bucky somehow makes it all seem charming and unique, but normal. Acceptable. And strangely, he doesn't wander off to drink with someone who drinks or to dance with someone who dances. He stays and chats with Gale, and they keep laughing until it's time to go home.

It just works.

Bucky invites him out the next weekend too. And the next and the next, when Gale keeps saying yes.

He may be a lousy roommate, but Gale likes him anyways.

In addition to being a lousy roommate, Bucky is also funny, quick, energetic, and magnanimous.

Also, the guy's a hell of a pilot. It's the one thing he really takes seriously.

They learn the basics of lift and drag and thrust together. If you wait for the right weather, push the throttle hard, and keep a steady hand on the controls, the whole sky belongs to you. The only bad thing you might run into is someone else with the same instincts and equipment. Or the sun. Or the ground.

When Bucky flies, he fills up the whole cockpit with his presence. Barking orders with smiling eyes over his oxygen mask, he makes good calls every time, but never seems like he's thinking overmuch.

It's no surprise that Gale likes him. Everyone likes him.

The bigger surprise is how much Bucky seems to like him back.

As a serious-minded kid in secondhand clothing whose parents didn't bring him to church, little Gale Cleven never had much in the way of pals. They moved around a lot, across state lines usually, to shake the debt dogging his father's heels, and only settled back down in Wyoming after he was dead.

Gale spent most of his childhood reading books and building precarious treehouses by himself, but he did have one friend.

In Wyoming, his best friend was Margie Spencer, with whom he played epic bouts of pretend. Margie would play the beautiful Martian space alien princess, and Gale would play the brave American soldier who had to take her down. They could chat for hours and hours, more than Gale ever talked to anyone, and they could play pretend better than anyone else in town. Margie told him so.

Of course, Gale eventually moved away, and he had to start hanging around with boys, but as always, the things they talked about didn't sit well with him. They wanted to shoot dice and shoot guns and make it with girls, and Gale just...didn't.

Somehow Bucky is different, even with all the ways he's just the same. The feeling between them is kinder and more understanding, without the constant high-pitched stinging fear of making the wrong move; Bucky wouldn't care. Bucky would do worse. The two of them, they laugh at the same jokes. They're the same kind of almost-mean but with the same instinct to do the right thing, even when no one is watching. They comprehend what the other is saying, even when they aren't saying much. They want completely different results out of life,

but they just plain enjoy each other.

Gale knows Bucky likes him, because Bucky tells him so, and he laughs at all of Gale's jibes, and he stares at him from the side with clear, fond eyes. Bucky pushes and prods and tries to get Gale to do what he wants, but he's twice as delighted when Gale doesn't give in.

And other times Gale will tell him to give it a rest, and Bucky will just obey, without even appearing to think very much about it.

Every part of knowing him feels good, a missing piece to the experience of being a person that's finally locked into place. Gale has a best friend of his very own, like people have in the movies, somehow, against all odds, even though Gale doesn't follow sports or gamble or drink or—

Bucky loves introducing him to girls.

He's always already got his own date, of course, who he'll have been drunkenly kissing on the dance floor all night long, and her lipstick will still be smeared on his chin when he grandly announces something like, "Buck, this is Clara. Clara, Buck."

Gale will roll his eyes at Bucky, but still nod at the girl politely. "Nice to meet you, Clara. And I am sorry this miscreant dragged you over here."

And the girl will go, "Wait— So you're Bucky and he's—"

"Buck here's shy," Bucky will say, grinning, without ever breaking eye contact with Gale. "Doesn't even dance."

Gale will end up not doing anything with the girl Bucky presented to him, and Bucky will pause to give Gale an evaluating look as he takes his date by the waist. Gale shrugs, hands up. Bucky winks.

"How did *you* two get to be friends?" his date will ask as they go off to neck in some parking lot.

Mystery of the goddamn world, that's how.

Life is good in Texas, especially once the Eighth starts organizing for war in earnest.

Most every morning, Gale wakes up before Bucky. He's always been one to rise with the sun, to be out of the house before anyone has a chance to frustrate him.

Bucky sleeps with his mustached mouth mashed into his pillow, body spread out across his meager military mattress with careless abandon. Next to his bed, a small window beams light down on the brown curls on the back of his head, making them shine in the dawn twilight. He snores just softly.

Gale cracks a window if it's gotten too stuffy overnight and throws Bucky's blanket back on him if he's kicked it on the floor.

He steps out for a shower, shaves neatly, styles his hair with two fingerfuls of pomade and five perfectly practiced swoops of his comb. He presses his khaki warm weather uniform— then presses Bucky's too for good measure. He buttons his slacks, polishes his shoes, tucks his tie, tugs his shirt cuffs to the right length, shines up his buttons and pins.

He's never had such fine things, so he takes care of each one prudently. It's not about regulation. It's about pride.

Gale is respected here, a stellar pilot, a consummate professional, a constant candidate for early promotion. He doesn't have Bucky's raw charisma or innate instinct for leadership, but he's got the rest of what he needs in spades.

Eventually, he'll squeeze Bucky's sleep-warm shoulder to wake him, and Bucky will make a whiny noise as he sits up. "I sleep in?" he'll croak, wiping his damp chin with his shoulder, rubbing at his bare chest.

"Nah," Gale will tell him without looking too long. "I wouldn't let you. It'd make me look bad."

He keeps everything in order, always.

It's what Gale's good at.

It's through his mother of all people that he reconnects with Marge Spencer. His mom calls him every month to give updates from town, to lament the debts and poverty still leftover by his father's passing even after ten years, and to give him tips about what girls she knows around his age, and this time she lets Gale know that Little Margie from Wyoming is down in Texas too, studying engineering at the college nearby.

Gale and Marge are a perfect match. It's almost disconcerting.

It's been years since they were playground playmates, but they still have so much in common. They read the same pulpy books, study the same type of hard sciences, and want the same thing after the war. Marge's family is more religious than his, but not so much he can't ultimately tolerate it.

They can spend hours where every sentence starts with, "Do you remember—" or they can spend hours discussing their lives now, telling stories about Bucky getting himself in trouble or Professor Linden assigning his courses the wrong homework.

Marge is witty, but in a reserved way. She has a low, sweet voice and always says what she wants with it.

When they go out together, people in the world glance over at them, like, *Oh my. Would you look at that*, in the jealous admiring sort of way.

Gale has had casual girlfriends like everyone should, but he's never wanted a girl's attention like he wants Marge's. They have a whole world in the space between them, a whole splendid golden future that they can only catch a glimpse of if they get real close up and cross-eyed.

"Ooh, finally a bird fine enough for Major Cleven," Bucky simpers, when Gale tells him about her. "You hug her and kiss her and everything?"

"Would you knock it off?" Gale laughs.

And, marvel of marvels, Bucky does, just because Gale asked him to.

Everything tries subtly to change around the time Bucky leaves for the war, but Gale keeps it in order for the both of them. It's no trouble at all; it's what he's there for.

The night before Bucky ships out, they have a double date with Marge and her friend from college.

Marge thinks she should've introduced Bucky and Donna earlier, but Gale thinks he should have introduced Bucky and Marge. It's not that they'd be interested in each other, of course; Marge hates that sort of attention-stealing macho energy in a man, but...being with them both together is a rather lovely thing.

They make each other laugh the way they make Gale laugh. They each exchange stories about him from such different parts of his life, like they're trading baseball cards, like it's little pieces of Gale that each of them own.

Something about the night in general is electrifying.

Bucky's hands are huge on Donna's waist, so much that he engulfs half her torso just between his broad palms. Marge's lovely voice is in Gale's ear asking him to write to her. Her shoulders are warm and narrow and soft under his arm. The music sways and dips. Marge's face lights up and her hair gleams under the yellow halogen light.

Gale feels alight with nerves in a way he usually doesn't feel around her, and so he tells her softly, "I love you, you know," while Bucky and Donna are over dancing by the bar.

She sparkles up at him. "Now you've gone and done it, Gale Clevon. No taking it back!"

Feeling bold, he gropes at her waist, a little higher than usual, where her girdle meets her rib cage under that blue dress. "Well, I'm not about to," he says, low.

She opens her mouth in faux shock. "*What* has gotten into you tonight?" she gasps, wriggling in his grasp, plainly pleased. "What happened to my perfect gentleman?"

"There's no gentlemen in the Hundredth, Marge!" Bucky calls from the dance floor. "Don't let that knucklehead fool you!"

He's drunk already, leaning close to Donna and shooting off thousand watt grins like anything. He cuts a charming figure in his uniform, made broader and taller by the flattering lines of his pinks and greens, dark hair tousled and straying in curls down his forehead like usual, his gaze hazy but direct.

He winks when Gale catches his eye, which is strange, because usually when he winks at Gale it means that Gale won't be going home with a girl and he will, but Gale has been going home with Marge for weeks now, and Bucky's got no time to park with Donna if he wants to get any sleep before wheels-up.

Whatever shows up on Gale's face makes Bucky's smile fade, and he turns back to Donna in the next moment, suddenly joining in with the jukebox, belting an off-key rendition of Benny Goodman's latest.

Marge drops them off back at the base and leans out the driver's window for a kiss, which Gale delivers with gusto.

Afterwards, pointing her finger, she imperiously whispers, "Ask him."

"Alright, Marge," Gale agrees. He smiles at the serious set of her chin. "Whatever you want."

"Now that's what I like to hear," Marge jokes, reaching up to grab Gale's tie and tug him down for another kiss.

He pulls away with a chuckle. "I already said I'd do it!"

Bucky finally emerges from Marge's backseat, having finished his own goodbyes, and catches Gale up with an arm hooked around his neck. "Alright, lover boy, let's go. Thanks for the ride, Marge!"

He's taller than Gale, so they fit together easily as always, and the night is cool enough their bodies aren't too warm against one another.

It's the sort of temperate darkness that makes you want to keep walking past your front door, just to stay out in the air.

Marge taps the horn twice before she drives off, and Gale keenly feels that he is exactly where he's supposed to be, under the arm of his best friend, leaving a date with a beautiful girl, finally on his way to the

war that everyone wants to go fight.

A tremulous sense of relief washes over him. He feels in some deep, terrifying way that he almost didn't get here. But here he is.

He finished school at the right time, joined the Air Forces at the right time, met Marge at the right time, and everything else will come in time, too.

The closer they get to the barracks, Bucky gets more and more subdued. He's serious and quiet as they undress and wash up, to which it feels almost eerie to bear witness. He keeps glancing at Gale like he thinks Gale said something he didn't hear, but Gale hasn't spoken once.

He's just waiting.

Bucky will say it if he wants to say it. He always does, eventually.

It was all excitement back at the bar, to be the first one shipping out, but maybe it's more complicated than that in the dark, waiting to wake up early to fly to the war.

When they're lying in bed, and Gale has almost given up hope, Bucky finally comes out with the ugly truth.

"You and Marge aren't like what I expected," is what he says, casually, as if they'd been having a conversation all this time.

Gale sighs a chuckle, rolling to face him. "And here I thought you were over there worrying about tomorrow." Of course Bucky's question is about women. "What do you even mean by that?"

Bucky doesn't smile at his response. He furrows his brows, eyes cast down. "I dunno," he says. "Marge is the kind of girl you marry, I guess." He hesitates, still avoiding eye contact. "I just, uh...hadn't thought you were the marrying type."

Well.

Gale feels his body wash cold and then hot, but he keeps a steady hand on how his voice sounds, throttling it back from the way he wants to holler. "What the hell are you talking about, John?"

Bucky startles and looks at him wide-eyed, like he's surprised at Gale for being angry. "I didn't mean anything by it, Buck! It's not like I gave a damn anyways."

"You didn't— Jesus." The tension breaks in Gale all at once and he laughs in disbelief. "You didn't mean anything by it. Okay, Bucky."

"Yeesh," Bucky laughs.

They fall quiet for a long, twisting moment, each thinking whatever he needs to think about what was said.

"Oh," Gale remembers suddenly, "Marge wanted me to give you Donna's address, by the way."

Bucky perks up. "That's gotta be a line," he says with a laugh. "I was a jerk all night. I barely even paid attention to her!"

"Yeah, well, Marge says every guy needs someone to write to."

Bucky rolls himself onto his back, considering. "So Donna had nothing to do with it. Eh, I'm not so good at writing anyways. My grade school penpal quit me when I kept spelling his name wrong."

Gale smiles, imagining a little Bucky with a pencil behind his ear. "You just didn't have war stories to tell yet."

"Clearly you've never been to Catholic school."

"No, I have not," Gale agrees, and he thinks maybe that'll be it, but then he hears himself taking a breath to add more.

And stops short.

If there's one thing he learned during his childhood, it's that some vices can't be completely avoided. Sometimes you have to open up pressure valves to make the engine run right. You should at least get to look at the food, even if you can't eat it.

"Out with it," Bucky tells him, sounding resigned. "I can hear you thinking."

"Write me a letter, John," Gale says, redirecting his eyes up at the plaster ceiling. His voice is deep and strange to his own ears, rough in a way he doesn't expect. "I won't mind if you misspell Gale."

Dark silence falls across the room.

He feels Bucky looking at him.

Crickets chirp outside.

The fan whirs by the window.

Eventually Bucky laughs and says, “Sure, Buck,” as if Gale were joking.

After a few minutes, they taper off into silence as usual. Bucky makes like he’s getting ready to sleep, sighing overly loud and then going quiet, but he obviously isn’t. He sleeps on his stomach, and he hasn’t turned over. He snores the moment he loses consciousness, but there’s a conspicuous absence of sound.

Gale rolls to face the wall and tries to stay still long enough that Bucky will be fooled.

At last, the telltale rhythmic shuffling fills their tiny room.

Bucky makes low noises when he jacks off, like an angry animal or a rumble of thunder, way down deep in his body.

He tries to keep his breath steady but audibly trembles with the effort, little stops and stutters like maybe he can’t stand how good it feels.

The room buzzes with energy like static electricity. The hair on Gale’s arms stands straight up.

It’s maddening how they always end up wanting to go at it on the same nights, but Bucky beat him to it, so Gale has no choice but to endure.

He’s not going to move. He’s not going to move. He’s better than that. He’s going to sleep. He’s going straight to sleep. That’s the way it ought to be and that’s the way it’s going to be.

Bucky sends him a letter from Greenland.

He writes in short sentences that don't read as clever as he'd speak them, so maybe that overly harsh grade school penpal was onto something after all. He does misspell a few words, though not Gale's name, which he omits completely.

Reading it alone in the room they used to share, it's hard to imagine it's a letter that John 'Bucky' Egan wrote at all, bent over a sheaf of stationary next to a glass of whiskey, pursing his mouth under his mustache as he thinks of his next word.

Instead, Gale can imagine that Bucky might be any old soldier on his way over to Europe and that Gale might be any old recipient of such correspondence.

Bucky tells half the story of the unicorn incident at the bar, then abruptly switches to describing the flight over, and then complains for the last few sentences about his navigator being an idiot. He just writes, matter of fact, about the life he's leading while Gale isn't there for it, a temporary summary so there isn't so much distance to fill in once they find their way back to each other. The letter ends with a crude drawing of a B-17 and

Miss you already Buck!

*Love,
John C. Egan*

Chapter End Notes

me writing what is objectively the most boring and normal chapter of this fic: THESE ARE THE RAVINGS OF A MADMAN!!! WHO WILL STOP THIS INSANITY!!!!!!!!!! EACH GODLESS WORD IS MORE FRIGHTENING THAN THE LAST!

also fyi if u ever reread this and things have changed slightly, you are not misremembering! i'm a serial editor of already published work, and i refuse to ever grow or change.

next time,

▼ 🇬🇧 2. England

- 📄 sleeping in the officer's b...
- 📄 bucky is different
- 📄 life being a respected ma...
- 📄 combat
- 📄 bucky talks about getting...
- 📄 marge letters
- 📄 bomb raid
- 📄 bucky's jerking off probl...
- 📄 burckt evil ritual
- 📄 the guys tease gale abt h...
- 📄 plane mouth timez
- 📄 they have a super weird j...

England

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gale and Bucky both sleep in the officer's quarters.

The metal beds lie in neat rows under the prefab corrugated arch of the ceiling, like a hospital wing. The windows pour in cloudy, grey light during the day, and remain firmly shuttered at night to ward off bombings.

Kidd, Bowman, Veal, Turner, Brady and the rest bunk with them too, but Bucky made sure that he and Gale would be next-door neighbors, naturally.

Bucky still snores. Among other things.

There are hints, right away, that something's amiss.

The first day Gale gets to England, Bucky parades him around like he owns him. He keeps one arm gripped tightly around Gale's shoulders, the other gesturing joyously as he declares, "Look who finally decided to show up!" to every damn airman on base who got there first.

When he drives the Jeep, he stretches out that same arm across the back of Gale's seat.

He brings him a hard-won bike. He ruffles the back of Gale's hair when he shows him the officer's mess. He pats Gale's back when Gale pats Meatball's. He sleeps fitfully and insists on the lucky deuce and stares after Gale leaving on the truck like a fool.

Gale's trying to decide whether he should be angry about it all after that 'marrying type' comment Bucky made back in Texas, and then he flies his first mission.

At some point between takeoff and landing, he comes to understand that he's going to die here. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But the math is the math. There's long odds and there's total lunacy.

Bucky's a betting man, and so he bets on the two of them anyways. They're going to get through, still flying to the end. He can feel it!

Gale's realistic; he touches down from mission one already starting to mourn.

Still, on borrowed time though it may be, Gale lives a life in England.

On non-mission days, he's up with the sun. He showers, shaves, styles his hair. He puts on his cold weather uniform, his crusher cap, and his lambskin jacket. He pops the collar up.

Someone else usually wakes Bucky up before Gale gets the chance these days, but when they inevitably meet up for breakfast, Bucky grins and says, "Mornin', sunshine," just like he would back in Texas.

They move around the base as a unit, caps and aviators and chewing gum.

The men on base look at the two of them and think, *Now that's what a pilot is supposed to look like. That's how you get through this thing still breathing.*

Whether or not it's true, it lights a fire in Gale's belly.

He values respect more than most, he suspects.

His father was not a respected man, not anywhere he went in the world. He wasn't even respected in his own house. Gale spent so much of his childhood furious with his mother for it, until eventually he'd been conned enough times to take the hint.

His father would make so many sweet promises, tell so many beautiful lies, that to take him at his word or give him the benefit of the doubt was a vulnerable and stupid thing to attempt, worse than dropping

into enemy territory with nothing but a map sewn inside your jacket.

Speaking of: on mission days, the orderlies wake them up before the sun has a chance to even change the color of the sky.

Gale pulls on his flight suit, boots and coat, straps on his harness, his life jacket, his blue scarf, his gloves, his throat radio, his cap. He eats breakfast with the men. They look to him to be brave and unflappable, so he is. He flies, gets closer to the sun than most people have ever been, and watches boys fall out of the air like hailstones.

Everything might not be pleasant, but it's all how it's supposed to be, a disorienting and violent grind: twelve hours of being admired and doted on and followed like a savior, and two hours of Krauts killing his people and scaring the absolute living shit out of him.

But then, sometimes Bucky scares him too.

Maybe it's just that Bucky's as frightened as any of them. Maybe deep down he knows that they're dead men, gambler's hope be damned. Or maybe that's not why he's acting so strange. Maybe he wants to keep Gale safe, but there's no real way for him to do it, so instead he's picking fights with their allies and drunkenly touching Gale's face, and telling him, without so much as a warning, "It'd be me, and it'd be you, Buck."

One morning, Bucky says conversationally over breakfast, "You know, one of the men tried to proposition me in the hangar yesterday. He had a jar of Vaseline like—" He makes a huge gesture that just cannot be the size of a Vaseline jar.

Gale nearly drops his fork, but he holds on by a thread. He blinks several times before he gets out, "*What?*"

"I mean, I told him no, of course," Bucky goes on, in between devouring the last of his eggs.

Gale frowns, trying to get his brain around what's being said to him.

He has the presence of mind to look around for listening ears. "Of course," he echoes vaguely as he searches.

There's no one. Bucky probably checked before bringing it up.

Gale wouldn't admit to something like this under pain of death, but maybe it's different for guys who went to Catholic school.

"Relax, Buck," Bucky laughs, leaning back, arms across the chairs on either side of him. He looks striking and confident like usual. "Queers know how to drop bombs as good as anyone else."

"Who?" Gale asks.

Bucky's smile turns sharp, and he leans forward now, elbows on the tabletop, hands lightly folded in front of him. "Why?" he replies with raised eyebrows. "You wanna turn him in?"

Gale hadn't been thinking that at all. He plum forgot he was supposed to. He finds himself speechless.

"You wanna turn *me* in?" Bucky asks next, which Gale can't believe he's hearing until Bucky follows it up with, "I don't make a habit of discharging perfectly good pilots when we don't have enough of them to begin with, Major, no matter what regulation says I should do."

Pilots. Gale's mind races through the line-up and every possibility strikes him as sicker and more vile than the last.

"So why are you even telling me this, Bucky?" he wonders, fatigued.

Bucky shrugs, making a face that says 'What's the big deal?' "Just thought it was interesting." And he grins, leisurely, unrushed and unbothered. "Didn't know you'd take it so serious."

One evening, at the bar in town, Curt gasps, "She's looking over here again!" and then he and Bucky dissolve into giggles.

"Buck, she's got it bad," Bucky says. "You could at least put her out of her misery before she waits the whole night."

Gale rolls his eyes and waves them off.

The girl in the pink dress at the other end of the pub has come up and spoken with him a few times, it's true, but nothing's going to happen, obviously.

There are plenty of guys with sweethearts back home who partake of the local stock, as it were, but Gale is loathe to be one of them.

She's pretty, he supposes, but no prettier than Marge. Even if she was, what would be the point of something like that?

"Oh, Major Cleven, I'm hot under the collar!" Curt giggles, folding his hands next to his face and leaning into Gale's shoulder.

Bucky's on the other side, whimpering, "What I wouldn't give for a handsome pilot to show me how the Americans do it!"

"Alright, alright," Gale says, trying to put an end to it before they get too mean. "It's not gonna happen, so give it up."

"Of course not, Buck," Curt agrees good-naturedly, leaning away just as easy. "You got that beautiful dame back home waitin' on ya! We was just messing around."

Bucky takes a swig of his drink and says, "You mind if I take a shot then?"

Gale makes a gesture like, Go ahead.

But Bucky doesn't go. He sways in to chat with Curt on Gale's other side, pressing his chest up against Gale's arm.

"Some guys get all the luck," Curt's saying. "And this one doesn't even believe in the stuff!"

"Eh, Buck comes by it honestly," Bucky responds, grabbing Gale by the chin. "Look at that face, would ya?"

"Fellas—" Gale tries to interject.

"Luck schmuck! Buck doesn't need it! He's already got a royal flush!" Bucky says, mocking and grinning even as Gale warningly takes a hold of his arm. "Alright, alright, I'm done! I know you hate gambling talk! I'll stop!"

Gale likes gambling, actually. He's tried it before, when he was a kid. Closest thing to it since is flying without landing gear. He liked drinking, too, the one time he did, letting his clumsy animal body take

over for his brain. Liking isn't the problem. Gale likes a lot of things!

One night, during an air raid, Bucky and Gale lie down head-to-foot in a bed of pine needles back behind the line of shelters, as many of the men have taken to doing, staring up at familiar constellations in an unfamiliar sky, waiting for the Luftwaffe to run out of fuel.

They lie together in the dark literally every night and have done for over a year now, but it feels different outside in the open air under the fresh pine.

The war rages on distantly, and everything here is perfectly still.

Gale drifts, thinking only about the smell of nature, and so he jerks slightly when Bucky's hand lands on his leg.

He pops his head up to see, and Bucky has rolled over onto his belly, head cradled in the crook of one arm, the other outstretched to hold onto Gale's shin over his uniform.

Bucky must notice him looking, but he doesn't look back, so after a moment, Gale lays down again like one of the fallen pine boughs, and drifts again too, closing his brain up for business as Bucky's hand slips in under the hem of his trouser leg and softly touches his skin.

It feels raw and strange. Bucky thumbs into the elastic of his army-issue sock, rubbing the pressure marks left across Gale's shin bone.

Gale lets him do it for just a moment before he knocks his boot lightly against Bucky's shoulder and moves his leg away.

"Tickles," he says softly.

And amidst it all, Bucky's lousy roommate tendencies have only gotten worse.

Gale might have predicted, if he'd deigned to consider such a thing, that Bucky would tone down the growly masturbation routine when Gale wasn't its only witness.

It only gets louder. And more frequent.

A scant two feet from Gale's fingertips, Bucky jacks off and groans and shifts around and ostensibly has a merry old time, and there are a dozen other guys all around them.

It might be the least important reason Gale is losing his mind lately, but it doesn't help.

The other officers start making jokes about it, but Bucky still seems blissfully unaware that what he's doing is strange.

Brady makes a disparaging remark at dinner, and Bucky just shrugs and laughs, "Gotta keep the pipes clean."

"Jesus, he needs to get laid," Jack says under his breath.

Gale closes his eyes, shaking his head, playing the longsuffering best friend as always.

Bucky does probably need to get laid. His attempts at seducing girls in town or on base have gotten less and less effective as the weeks wear on. Sometimes he doesn't even put in the work to *seem* like he's trying to pick up a girl, just parks himself down between Buck and Curt and makes loud jokes about the English, who can clearly hear him.

It gets to the point that Vealman, whose bed is on Bucky's other side, chucks a pillow at him one night when he's right in the middle of things, really ramping up to the end by the sound of it.

"What the hell?!" Bucky shouts, sitting up.

"Shut the fuck up!" Vealman replies, muffled from inside the blanket he's pulled over his head.

Someone turns on the light. A few guys pop up to check what's going on.

Gale squints at the sudden brightness, rubbing at his eyes until they clear and see Bucky getting up, flushed and clearly hard in his underwear, to chuck the pillow back as forcefully as possible.

Vealman grunts.

Gale squeezes his eyes shut again.

You're doing this on purpose, he wants to say, but what on Earth

would be the result of that conversation?

Marge sprays the back of each letter with a lovely spritz of White Shoulders perfume.

The pages she sends have a whole world inside them.

She starts with a short section summarizing her college life lately, responding to any questions Gale asked or stories he told, but the majority of the word count is dedicated to beautiful speculation about their future.

Marge is a talented writer, who describes her family farm, how she's going to show Gale the valley out past the edge of the cow pasture, where she never got the chance to take him when they were kids. She describes how in the summer the lightning bugs blink on and off like Christmas lights, spread out over the fields like a carpet of stars. She tells him that she'll make him a roast dinner the night he gets back, with potatoes, onions, and carrots, coated in her grandma's secret glaze. She says they'll go on walks out in the woods and find wildflowers. Every word is full of magic and safety and possibility.

She signs,

Hugs and kisses,
Marge

Gale reads Marge's letters voraciously. He reads and rereads, trying to absorb her lovely world into his tangled brain. It's still possible, he tells himself. It is possible.

The guys notice, obviously.

"I see Major Cleven's back at it," Crosby teases, one night at the officer's club.

"Jesus, the letters again, Buck? Even at the bar?" Curt laughs, delighted. "I've never seen a guy so in love in my whole life!"

Gale smiles slightly as he folds Marge's latest back up and tucks it away in his jacket. "Just catching up on things in Texas," he says.

"Yeah, I bet," Curt replies. And then he whacks the back of his hand against Bucky's chest. "Fellas, I tell ya, Major Cleven keeps one of those sweet-smelling correspondences in his *wallet*. I've seen him reading in the latrines so he can be alone with it!"

Bucky raises his eyebrows. "My *dearest* Gale," he says into the edge of his whiskey glass, playing along a bit.

Gale's chest clenches.

"My dearest, bravest, handsomest, wonderfulest Gale!" Curt adds in a high pitched voice, fluttering his eyelashes. "What kind of a name is 'Gale,' anyways?"

"Alright, now, that's enough," Gale says, still smiling to soften his words. "Don't you all have some Red Cross ladies to bother?"

Bucky smacks his hand on the bar counter and downs the rest of his drink in one long gulp. "You heard the man!" he hollers. "Let's dance!"

The evening before Algeria, Bucky invites Gale out to go get drunk in his plane. Well, first he invites Curt, but Curt whines about the last time Bucky got drunk by the forts and refuses to go. So then he invites Gale.

It's probably not as fun to get shitfaced drunk when the person next to you doesn't partake, but Bucky never complains.

They sit in the cockpit of Gale's fort, windows open on either side to get a cross breeze, Bucky with his feet up on the control panel, Gale with his feet on the floor.

And then out of nowhere Bucky asks, "You really keep Marge's letter in your wallet?"

Gale looks at him quickly, caught. "So what if I do?"

"Nothing," Bucky says, shaking his head. "Just curious. She's a great girl."

Gale frowns at him, worried suddenly at what he's getting at. "She is," he agrees.

"Think you'll end up marrying her when we get back?"

Getting back seems like a distant and foolish dream, but Gale concedes, "Sure, if she'll have me."

Bucky smiles at him, his little triangular smile. "Oh, she'll have you, Buck," he says. "She'd be crazy not to."

Gale huffs an uncomfortable laugh at his certainty. "Well, thanks."

Bucky shrugs again and takes another long drag from his flask.

Pulling his coat tighter around himself, Gale turns to stare out at the sun setting behind the tower, even though he feels Bucky looking at him from the side. He shouldn't look back. He knows that as well as he knows his take-off checklist or the back of his hand.

Thinking of Marge's letters and their impossible promises of peacetime, he adds, "Or maybe it won't work out that way. Can't predict the future. Especially not here."

"Hey," Bucky says.

"What now?" Gale asks the sky.

"Buck, hey," Bucky says, sounding amused.

Gale looks.

Bucky's grinning at him, as ever. "You know you'll be stuck with me either way, right?" he asks, reaching out to pat Gale's cheek.

Gale huffs a laugh, going to turn back to the windscreen, but Bucky's hand doesn't leave his face somehow, so he looks again.

And Bucky's smile has fallen down into something else, funny eyebrows pulling in together, mouth hanging slightly ajar under his mustache.

Gale waits for the next remark, the next witty rejoinder, but it never comes.

He can hear the repair crews working away down the tarmac, screeches of welding and screwing, shouts and thumps.

Bucky's eyes drop, half-lidded, down to stare at the place his hand touches.

And Gale's heart detonates inside his chest as he feels Bucky's wide thumb pressing in on the middle of his bottom lip. Terror strikes through him like a hot knife.

"Don't do that," he blurts, getting up and stumbling back toward the hatch, where he crashes into the back of the cockpit with a clatter.

Bucky's hand falls from empty in the air to the headrest of the chair Gale vacated. "Don't do what, Buck?" he asks, sounding irritated.

"You know exactly what," Gale snarls. His whole body tingles, scalp to toes. It feels like he just flew a mission, all of the anticipation and bloodshed and heartbreak of hours compacted neatly down into the last ten seconds. "What the hell are you thinking, John?"

Bucky turns back to face him with a cruel, indistinct smile on his face. The orange light of the setting sun glows around him. "Don't think you wanna know," he says.

"Jesus," Gale gets out, climbing down toward the exit hatch as his mind races uselessly, hamster on a wheel. "Get your head on straight," he calls back as he flees.

He swings down out of the fort, finds his bike near the landing gear, and rides off down the tarmac, buzzing past a couple guys plodding through the mud and ironically thinking, *Thank you, Bucky*.

He rides out toward town, the cool air blowing through his hair and down his stuffy collar, and he finally, finally allows himself to think, all at once, about what it is that John Egan thinks he wants from him.

Does he want Gale to be one of his weekend sweethearts? Does he want Gale to swoon and lay down underneath him with spread legs? Does he want Gale to be what Gale used to imagine in his most secret thoughts—the pining recipient of a traveling soldier's love letters? Does he want Gale to be Gale at all?

Gale passes by Crosby and Bubbles in town, who try to flag him down and into the pub, but he waves them off. It's a matter of course that

Bucky will end up there tonight, as that's where he always goes when he's feeling surly and agitated.

Gale circles the town center a few times before he starts feeling stupid and rides back to the base on the bike Bucky bought for him, considering that Bucky may not even know what he wants.

And it's okay, no matter what it ends up being.

Gale can hold it all together, even against Bucky's will. He'll go to bed early, try to be unconscious by the time Bucky gets back from the bar to sleep in the bed beside him, and in the morning, they'll both pretend nothing happened.

So, imagine Gale's surprise when he arrives back at barracks to find that Bucky has beaten him there.

"What're you doing here?" he says, frozen in the doorway.

Bucky, halfway into his bed in his underwear, hair wet from the showers, squints back at him. "This is the officer's quarters, Buck."

Gale takes in the look of him, broad, bare shoulders hunched, skin pink from hot water.

"Figured you'd be in town," he says eventually. His skin absolutely crawls with the tension in the room.

"If you can believe it, I didn't feel much like picking up a girl tonight," Bucky replies with a sarcastic smile. He flops down on his bed summarily.

Jesus. All the space in this expansive, echoing building, and they're going to tuck in right next to each other.

Bucky lays with his hands behind his head, not even pretending to sleep, openly watching Gale as he gets ready for bed in stiff and jerky movements.

"If you're that mad," Bucky says eventually, "you can just hit me. I won't mind."

"I don't wanna hit you, John," Gale mutters as he fluffs his pillow

with more aggression than is strictly necessary. “I’m not mad.”

Bucky scoffs. “*I’m not mad*,” he repeats in a low-voiced imitation, that, to be fair, sounds furious.

“Alright, go to the bar if you want to talk,” Gale tells him, already tired. “Go to sleep if you want to sleep.”

“Oh, no, after *you*, your majesty,” Bucky replies, spreading out one hand expansively at Gale’s bed.

There’s no point in talking to him when he gets like this, so Gale just sighs and climbs on in, tucking himself tightly, turning over to face away, and pulling the chain to turn off his lamp.

Bucky doesn’t pull his. He doesn’t even pretend he might sleep. He shuffles around for a minute in the dim and then...

Jesus Christ.

Does he expect Gale to pretend to sleep through it, like he usually does?

Telltale rhythmic movements.

After a moment, that low, animal sound.

Gale doesn’t even think. He flips over to give Bucky a dirty look.

Bucky raises his eyebrows back, and then...keeps going.

It’s like someone ripped Gale’s oxygen mask off at 11,000 feet.

The thin military bedding kicks slightly with the movement of Bucky’s fist, and his face goes vulnerable and troubled, brows furrowed, lips parted. His eyes drift away from Gale’s as he descends into some unseen fantasy.

You’re doing this on purpose, Gale wants to say. But then, he thinks... Yeah. Bucky *is* doing it on purpose.

His mouth fills with spit.

“Pull down the blanket,” he says hoarsely.

In the corner of his eye, he sees Bucky’s face jerk up to stare at him, but he can’t look away from the place where the covers move.

A moment later, Bucky grabs them in a white knuckled grip and flings them down past his knees.

With his other hand he grips his cock, pulled up over the band of his white underwear, and he moves it without ceasing.

Even from across the gap, Gale can tell Bucky's dick is larger than he thought it would be from seeing it soft in the shower or in an outline through his clothes. His hand doesn't cover the whole thing at once. The head of it is flushed and pink and shiny in the twilight, and the noise of his movement—a slimy click click click—is so clear without bedding to muffle it.

“Yeah,” Gale hears himself murmuring, “that’s good, John.”

Bucky makes a protesting little grunt, but it is good. It's the only good thing left in the world.

The chemicals that flood Gale's brain are criminal. Every thought drips with evil. He can't hear. He can't see. He's broken out in goosebumps and chills from head to toe.

“Buck,” Bucky pants out suddenly, too loud.

“Quiet,” Gale says. It churns his guts and his lungs and his heartstrings. Anyone could walk in and see him watching Bucky Egan jacking off for him like a titty show. He's harder than he's ever been in his entire life. “You wanna get caught?”

Bucky twists in his bed, kicking the blankets further down, and groans out that low noise in his chest. “You're killin' me,” he mumbles, and twists his hand too.

Gale's hips kick forward a little. He feels himself twitching. He wants, so desperately, to do something he hasn't allowed himself to do.

You're better than this, Gale Cleven, he tells himself.

But war is a strange thing. He's seen someone die in front of him three times this week. The laces keep loosening, by force and by gore. The sky has been shaking things apart. What's the point, a guy might wonder, of denying oneself under circumstances like these? If that guy were to doubt, suddenly, that he'd ever lay eyes on Marge Spencer again, he might start to see the whole world differently.

Gale reaches down under the blankets with a trembling hand and rubs

himself over his pajamas. Pin-and-needle heat flushes out through his whole body. Without meaning to, he makes a noise.

“Fuck,” mutters Bucky, staring goggle eyed in his periphery.

It’s never felt like this.

It’s never— *never* felt like this.

Never when anyone has touched Gale, never when he’s touched himself, has it ever felt anything like this, lightning, sparklers, flash pan heat, explosions.

Bucky moves faster, groaning from down inside his chest. The sounds speed up. His cock leaks and jerks, wet and pink and hot.

Gale slides his hand inside his underwear, finally, and almost chokes on his own tongue at the feeling of it. He mirrors what he sees, like it might be Bucky’s huge hand on Gale’s dick instead of his own, even though the pace is too much, too fast, and even though it makes him feel like he might throw up just to imagine Bucky touching him this way.

But it’s not that crazy, is it? This has all been leading somewhere, since they got here— before that, since they met, or the night they went out with Marge, or Bucky being delighted by Gale being ‘shy,’ by him ‘not dancing with beautiful women,’ and not being ‘the marrying type.’ It’s all— It’s been leading here.

Gale is burning up, breaking out in a hot sweat, but he doesn’t dare pull down his covers like he told Bucky to do.

“Go on,” he says instead, between heaving breaths. “Go ahead.”

Finally, he dares to look up at Bucky’s face, and Bucky is already looking back, catching him in the act with an expression adjacent to anger. He looks at Gale like he wants to...hurt him, maybe. Or maybe that’s not what he wants, just something that’s dangerous in the same way.

His chest is bare and flexing, a dusting of dark hair down the middle of it, as Bucky tilts his head back on his pillow and brings his hand up to spit into it without ever breaking eye contact.

“Jesus,” Gale whispers, overwrought.

“Go ahead,” Bucky echoes back to him.

After, as they both pant across a horrible silence, Bucky takes a breath as if to say something.

And then the rest of the brass start coming back from their night out drinking, and they both dive under the covers to pretend to be asleep.

A few hours later, the orderly comes in to wake them up for the Africa mission. “Major Egan, you’re flying today.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m already up,” Bucky tells him.

“Major Cleven?” the orderly asks next.

Gale nods in the blinding beam of the flashlight, pushing himself to sit before he can think better of it. He glances up to find Bucky already staring at him.

When they meet eyes, Bucky smiles as sweet and slow as molasses in winter.

Chapter End Notes

gale: homophobically riding his gay little bike around town full of rage like the witch from the wizard of oz

bucky: i NEED him

a preview for next time!



3. Algeria

- getting the men settled
- oh boy oh golly the PLANE
- it happens again
- combat
- marge letters
- gale can't say yes too often
- ucky gets jelly

Algeria

Chapter Notes

oops! this chapter expanded into 2 parts, so the second half of the preview from last time will happen next chapter! hopefully this chapter has enough Action to satisfy you until next time tho lmao

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Gale and Bucky eventually end up claiming Brady's fort as their tent for the night, but before that, there are men to get settled.

The number of men is devastating in itself. Worst losses in the task force.

Just that fast, Regensburg-Schweinfurt goes from the largest air armada ever assembled in the history of mankind to the one where they lost Curt.

Bucky's sure he's fine.

Gale knows that doesn't make sense.

There's simply been too much for any one person to process in twenty-four hours.

It seems the men don't share his compunctions, though, kissing the ground and kicking sand at each other and singing songs despite the fact that it's becoming clearer and clearer that their destination is not going to be the vacation they were promised in England.

Ice cream, they'd said. White sand beaches. Not to mention the 12th Air Force.

There's not even an airport.

Crank grabs Gale's shoulder when he sees him safe. "Christ, thank God you got here in one piece."

"Just barely," Gale allows.

“Egan,” Crank says pointedly, jabbing a finger at Bucky just over Gale’s shoulder, “would not shut his trap about you for all five goddamn hours.”

Bucky laughs, open and happy, like that’s not an incriminating piece of evidence as of last night. “Well, what would I do without my favorite little thorn in my side?”

Crank rolls his eyes but also cracks a smile, because everyone falls into the trap of Bucky’s charm eventually. “You can transport his ass back to England, alright, Buck? Maybe he’ll trust *you* to fly your own goddamn plane.”

Gale pauses. “Don’t know if I’ve got a goddamn plane to fly back to England, Crank,” he says regretfully.

Crank throws up his hands in defeat and stalks back to his crew.

“Guy acts like my expert advice doesn’t save all your sorry asses on a regular basis!” Bucky exclaims, bonking into Gale’s shoulder with his own. “What’s that all about?”

He keeps trying to joke around, to smile at Gale and get him to smile back, seemingly oblivious to the proverbial death shroud settling over Gale’s whole life.

Gale just looks at him for a moment.

Bucky doesn’t look like a man who did something shameful and regretful, or even who just flew a horrible god damned bombing mission. He looks put together, smiling hopefully in his cap and his sheepskin, peppy. Bucky wasn’t in command of a squad that just lost half its fighting force, Gale supposes. He’s not all banged up and flecked with blood, save for two neat little scratches across his cheekbone and nose bridge, a pair of gentle kisses from the dark angels of flak. He...probably feels differently than Gale does about what happened last night, too.

“I dunno, John,” Gale sighs at last. “Maybe he’s also been distracted wondering what the hell a reserve command pilot is.”

Bucky gives a loud guffaw and grabs him companionably by the back of the neck.

While they ride over to the open tent of an ‘airport’ with Jack, Bucky wraps Gale on the shoulder with his knuckles, craning around to shoot

him a grin in the back of the buggy.

When they're conferring with the brass from the other bomb groups, he stands close enough Gale can feel the zipper of his jacket bumping his elbow.

They receive orders from Lieutenant Colonel Turner of the 385th that they'll send the men to the nearby town of Constantine for a meal and a sleep, and Bucky cheerily volunteers his and Gale's crews to stay behind with the forts.

"Just like camping back in Texas," he cracks.

Jack scowls, no doubt realizing that Bucky has sentenced him to a long night of stopping the remaining forty discombobulated, mourning men of the 100th from eating scorpions and bothering the locals.

Gale shoots Jack an apologetic glance, but what's he really supposed to do, here? Disagree?

The men spend a long evening taking stock of the forts, making lists of which ones can be salvaged for the return trip and which ones have just found their new permanent home here in Algeria.

The injured get the first rides to town, in the covered back of an Army truck reportedly abandoned outside Constantine next to a burned out Nazi panzer, and then truckload by truckload the bustling airfield of bomb groups empties out to an exceptionally dusty parking lot of B-17s.

Bucky, Crank's crew, and what's left of Gale's share a meal of crusty biscuits out of C-Ration tins, lying back and looking at the swirls of the Milky Way as they pass by, until eventually Bucky gestures at the dark outlines of the forts and announces, "Alright, buddy up! Our Ritz-Carlton for the night is the lovely ladies that brought us here. I'll see you all back on duty at oh-six-hundred."

Bucky gets very quiet as they swing up into the belly of Brady's fort,

which is, as ever, a bad sign.

The plane's not as banged up as Gale's, and less organized, leftover portable oxygen canisters strewn about the bomb bay and maps on the floor of the navigator's room.

"Christ," Gale groans, dumping his tired bones down against the fuselage.

Bucky pauses for an awkward moment before he sits back against the same wall, eyes dark as he turns his head to look at Gale, sweaty curling hair at his temples. "*Finally* a moment alone," he says. Like a joke.

Gale can only glance at him briefly before it's too much. "Hm," he grunts.

He thinks about Marge. He tries to picture her in his mind's eye, but her face is blurred and vague.

Bucky clears his throat, jittering one heel up and down against the iron belly of the plane. Maybe he's got the shakes, belated comedown from adrenaline. Maybe that's not why he's nervous.

"You're sure quiet, aren't you?" he says, eventually.

Gale swallows. "Been told that once or twice."

The air shimmers with mirages of unease.

Maybe it's a one time thing. They can never talk about it again if Gale can just get Bucky to keep his mouth shut.

So, of course, the next moment, hunched over into Gale's space, Bucky suddenly confesses, "If I don't kiss you soon, I'll lose my goddamn mind, Buck."

Gale's stomach drops through the bottom of the airplane.

Flaps, he thinks distantly. Reverse the fucking engines.

"Don't start talking crazy," he says, but his voice is distorted and throttled. He doesn't meet Bucky's gaze, even when Bucky leans out from the wall to catch his eye.

Bucky, undeterred, begs, "Buck, please."

He reaches out with one hand to touch Gale's face, rough fingers pushing hair back from his temple.

Gale's body is a wildfire, an orange explosion in the cold blue sky, 12 o'clock even, no chutes. You're better than this, Gale Cleven, he tells himself, but, like always, it isn't true.

"Look at me, huh?" Bucky cajoles him, thumb across his cheekbone. "C'mon, look, Buck. I'm right here."

Gale looks.

Bucky breaks out in a smile immediately, gleaming in the dark. His lip quivers, though, like he's still scared. "There we go," he murmurs. "There you are."

They just stare at each other for a long time. Too long.

Bucky's eyes plead for one thing; Gale's plead for something else entirely.

"John," Gale says. "I don't think—"

"Pretty sure I know what you think," Bucky interrupts, licking his lips as his eyes flick down to Gale's. "What I don't know is what you want."

That stops Gale cold.

"Look, it'll be alright," Bucky babbles, still smiling. No big deal. Convincing Gale to watch a baseball game with him, have one sip of beer, make a sure bet. "I'll just— you know, just once, just to get it out of my system."

Pressure valves. Gale used to pretend to be the princess, sometimes, playing with Marge when they were kids, making her promise not to tell, so that he could go home and be the man of the house his father couldn't be.

"Please just let me kiss you, Buck," Bucky asks again, voice creaking. He's completely devoid of pride at the most unusual times.

"Alright. Just—" Gale gets out, and Bucky's on him before he can finish.

Permission finally in hand, Bucky mashes their mouths together and then corrects himself, tilting his head, fingers tingling through the

back of Gale's hair, neat mustache against his upper lip, smelling of aftershave and sweat and dusty sand.

Sparklers. Gun powder. Ignition incarnate. Gale's body is a flood of nothing but heat. Distressingly, it's not like kissing Marge at all.

Bucky crawls overtop of him, his knees on either side of Gale's lap, his hands up on the fuselage. There's no space for this. Bucky's taking up every inch in the place.

Gale holds his waist to steady him automatically, not even thinking, but then he feels a physical shock jolt through him at the heat under his hands.

They part for just a moment, and Bucky lets out an incredulous laugh, and then kisses Gale again.

What counts as 'just once' in the mind of John Egan, anyways?

He pushes Gale around like he can't help it, like a Rottweiler convinced he's a lapdog, not remotely aware it hurts when he stomps you in the gut, and gets him down against the deck with big arms wrapped around like Gale's a dame in a movie.

Gale clings back just as hard. He doesn't think. He just wants.

They kiss for a long while, squeezing together on the unforgiving floor of the plane, until it becomes impossible to ignore how hard they both are, bumping clumsily up against each other in the dark.

Gale nudges Bucky back and asks him, "Got it out of your system yet?"

Bucky stares with dark eyes, just breathing for a moment, and then a smile twitches its way onto his face. "Not even close, Buck," he replies with a breathless grin, and dives in to kiss again.

He paws at Gale's waist, which feels as delicate and diminutive as Donna's must have between Bucky's hands, shifting him up and over so that Bucky can rut against him properly. Even through all the layers of underwear and flight suit cotton, Gale feels it up into his throat when Bucky's hard cock slots in and rubs hard next to his.

Their mouths finally part as Bucky lets out a low groan, thunderous in the quiet, and gets one knee up for leverage so he can move better, pressing the cumbersome weight of his body down onto Gale, who

remains on his back like a prey animal squeaking and squirming underneath.

No, Gale thinks.

Something in him rebels violently against the image, and he shoves Bucky off.

Bucky just goes, easy, making a questioning noise but pushing up and falling back on his elbows as light as if Gale were lifting a balloon.

Gale gets up over him, a knee on either side.

“Don’t move,” he says, drawing up his officer voice out of nowhere.

And Bucky goes limp. His lips part a touch.

Gale doesn’t know how he knows Bucky will listen. He just knows.

“Hold still.” He kneels up until he’s in range of Bucky’s mouth, feeling the stretch to get around the breadth of his chest. He gets his suit open in a few quick motions.

All the while Bucky gazes up at him rapturously, dazed, half-lidded eyes, like Gale’s never seen him before, no thoughts in that curly head but one. His hands end up on Gale’s hips over his uniform, hot and loose and huge.

“Don’t move,” Gale says again, pushing his cockhead across Bucky’s bristly upper lip.

Bucky makes a reedy noise, and his eyelids flutter, and he doesn’t move, because Gale told him no.

Gale reaches down to cup the back of his neck, warm and slightly damp with sweat, which makes Bucky tilt his head back as if Gale had yanked his hair.

Gale’s dick bumps along his wet mouth and across to his pillowy sandpaper cheek, hot shocks with each impact, and Bucky stares up at him, pointy eyebrows pinched, chin in the midst of a vulnerable tremble, and wretchedly says, “*Buck*,” with a pretty little ‘please’ hidden inside it.

Gale burns. There’s dark black gasoline smoke thundering through his veins. He’s a monster. He’s larger and more powerful than anything on this side of Hell.

He would never treat Marge like this, is what he keeps on thinking. He wouldn't ask her to suck him off in a hundred million years. He wouldn't say yes if she *offered*.

But Bucky's not Marge.

He tips Bucky's head back further, then pulls his chin down to get his mouth open enough to dip his cock inside.

Of course it's wet and hot and smooth. Of course it would be, but it feels like a revelation. Gale could cry.

Bucky squeezes his eyes shut and groans, low and gravelly in his chest, and Gale wedges his thumb in next to his dick.

Bucky gags and then whimpers, tugging at Gale's hips, trying to draw him in, but Gale holds back, jacking himself with just the tip inside, holding Bucky's mouth open by the molars with a pinched, stinging thumb.

Bucky flails up wildly, hips twitching up into nothing.

"You can touch yourself," Gale grants him, gruff. "Go ahead, Bucky."

Bucky makes a hitched noise like a sob and complies, the sounds of it so familiar.

They get off like that, dark and quick, with Bucky choking and drooling under Gale in the dank, humid dim, trying to get him to go harder the whole time, and when Gale's finished, Bucky swallows it all down obediently.

Gale's chest absolutely heaves. His labored breathing echoes through the fort.

Bucky turns his head to nuzzle the inside of Gale's leg through his uniform.

"Jesus Christ, Buck," he says into the fabric.

He sounds... He sounds for all the world just like he sounded when Gale landed a bird with one engine. Like Major John Egan. Like Bucky. Like Gale's best friend, who he just got off with in an airplane.

Gale sits back, muscles all turned to jelly suddenly, ears rushing and eyes blurring.

Bucky pushes himself up from underneath to follow him, as if it's so easy to contend with Gale's bodyweight that he could've done so whenever he pleased.

Gale slides back, into Bucky's lap, the same way Marge used to sit in Gale's lap when they'd kiss in the back of her car. Sure enough, Bucky noses up to kiss him again, hands enveloping his neck, thumbs gentling around his ears and cheekbones.

Gale miserably surrenders to it, wrapping Bucky up, arms around his broad shoulders.

Bucky kisses him and kisses him and Gale kisses back like it's the end of the world.

Gale Cleven, you goddamn fool, he thinks, but that doesn't stop him one bit.

Eventually, Bucky pushes Gale off, laughing, "Take a breath, would ya?"

Gale can't breathe, though, or reason or pull back on the gas or tell himself to level things out, so he shakes his head, trying to pull Bucky back in.

"This can't happen again," he mutters into Bucky's mouth, and kisses him deeper this time.

Bucky laughs with his mouth full of Gale's tongue before shoving him back. "Give me a second to think; Jesus. What can't happen?" His eyes are the sweetest crescents in the whole world. His nose crinkles with mirth. His mustache is mussed and wet.

"Any of it," Gale gets out with difficulty. And closes in to kiss him more.

It happens again.

The two of them sleep in an exhausted, sweaty heap on the floor of the plane, and Bucky awakes the next morning like a cat with a proverbial tummy full of cream, laying a smooch on Gale first thing before he has a chance to protest, then grinning and loping around as

they switch off airfield duty with the next group and hitch a ride back into town to shower and recoup.

Jack, Bucky, and Gale are afforded the luxury of a dim hotel room in Constantine with two beds and a cot, and Jack is off sightseeing for the day with his buddy from the 94th, and so— well, Bucky doesn't even have to beg this time.

He just looks at Gale with his eyes all dark and focused, and Gale kisses him almost before they get inside the door. He sucks Gale's cock for real this time, and his technique makes it pretty damn clear Gale's not the first guy he's done it for.

After, they lie side by side in one of the beds, white bedsheets glowing golden in stripes from the afternoon sun through the shuttered window.

Bucky lights a cigarette and offers it to Gale, who fuzzily refuses, spent, barely able to move with a tangled brain and muscles still shivering with hormones and chemicals.

Bucky leans against the headboard and rests a hand on Gale's sweaty back over his singlet. "It's nothing to get all bent out of shape over," he comments lightly. "S just what men do when there's no women around."

Gale grunts, trying to concentrate on the weight of Bucky's hand when he breathes, the acrid smell of Lucky Strike smoke.

"And, you know, uh, I was thinking," Bucky goes on, all casual, "that maybe we could just— keep it going. At least until this damn war's over, huh?" He clears his throat. "Keep things simple. Good for morale."

"Sure, Bucky," murmurs Gale, low, even though he knows none of it is really true, that his morale has never been worse, that it isn't simple at all, that most men can spend a night together with a buddy without begging to be kissed, that they in fact have plenty of women around. "Till the war's over."

In reality, Gale suspects he simply won't need it like this when the war's over, but that feels cruel to say to Bucky somehow.

The damn war might never end.

Odds are that both of them won't be around to see it, if it ever does.

Bucky goes still at Gale's agreement. "Yeah?" he asks.

Gale turns over under his hand, looking up at the stained ceiling with furrowed brows. "Yeah," he says.

He just— wants to.

Bucky laughs, pressing down on Gale's chest as he leans over to stub out his cigarette on the side table. "Well, that was easy!" he exclaims.

Gale rolls his eyes, huffing a laugh in spite of himself. As always, Bucky makes him smile when he doesn't think he can. "You're easy," he shoots back, manhandling Bucky back down onto the bed.

Bucky takes it gamely, grinning up at Gale from the pillow with dark hair curling up around his head, clear blue eyes, sweat gathering across his collarbones, mischief in his gaze.

There are so many powerful and terrible agents of chaos sweeping through Gale's life, leaving exhaust trails of blood, phlegm, and fire, and Bucky's the one wildcard he's allowed to wrestle down into submission. He's the only soft thing for miles.

Gale had received a letter from Marge two days ago, but never got the chance to open it.

He'd tucked it in his jacket on his way out to the forts to sit with Bucky while he drank and inadvisably touched Gale's mouth, and it had remained there, forgotten, until now.

Gale goes out for an evening walk around town to talk himself into breaking the seal on it.

The paper smells immediately of her perfume, engulfing his face in an obscenely nostalgic plume of gardenia.

Gale's stomach turns acid and rations over like a rock tumbler.

Marge has written an effusive response to his story about Meatball stealing eggs from a nearby farm. Incurable!

Below that, she describes the pew they'll sit in at her family's church. The Andersens sit in front and the Bjorklands sit behind. Pastor Brown

is already excited to meet Gale; he so admires the men who enlisted to be pilots, citing the recruitment film with Jimmy Stewart and the high casualty rates. They'll hold hands between her parents and her brothers, and listen to the sermon, and Marge won't mind if Gale doesn't close his eyes to pray.

Hugs and kisses, she signs.

Marge

Chapter End Notes

fyi, i am just offscreen during this whole chapter, sweating and groaning, veins bulging out of my neck as i bend the rules of time and space so that cleagan can fool around in the plane.

[also i made a fandom tumblr if anyone wants to come hang out!](#) i will try to post playlists and little thoughts and extras and deranged ship content and such.

and a preview for next time, this time for real!!!!!!

- ▼ 🇬🇧 4. England
 - 📖 back in the officer's quarters
 - 📖 the odds
 - 📖 most of the time
 - 📖 getting caught thoughts
 - 📖 lil rutting times
 - 📖 reciprocal bj!!!!
 - 📖 gale can't say yes too often
 - 📖 marge letters
 - 📖 bucky gets jelly

England

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gale and Bucky settle back in at the officer's quarters back in England, just as if they'd never left, as if everything isn't completely different now.

Gale looks down at his same foot locker, his same neat bunk, his same side table with its same lovely photo of Marge Spencer, and he jumps when Bucky claps a hand on his shoulder.

"Cards later?" he asks, easy, already walking backward toward the door.

Gale frowns. Bucky hates playing cards, but Gale still jerks a nod. "Sure, Bucky."

Bucky points at him as he goes. "I got a briefing, but meet me in an hour!" he says, grinning broadly. "I will see you there, Buck!"

Gale shouldn't go, but he does. He just wants to, so bad.

When he gets to HQ an hour later, Bucky is there waiting in his tan and white sheepskin, looking smug as the day is long with his hands tucked in his pockets.

"Walk with me," Bucky tells him. "I know a spot." And he leads Gale innocently over to the equipment hut, which he unlocks with a key on his key ring, an artifact of his time as Air Executive.

Gale feels himself on tenterhooks as Bucky gestures him in and locks the door behind them, steering them into a closet in the back left corner.

Racks of chutes and life vests line each wall, with shelves full of flight

caps and flak vests standing in the middle. A desk with a stack of ledgers stands to one side under the little window near the ceiling, and this is where Bucky sits Gale down, on the tabletop, smiling at him huge under the late gray light of the English evening that spills in from above.

“No mission means this place stays locked up for everyone but you, me, and HQ,” Bucky says.

The closet door locks, too. It’s as close to a guarantee as the two of them are likely to get.

Bucky’s waiting for an acknowledgement. Throw me a bone, his little face says.

Gale fights a smile with limited success. “You did good, John,” he says, throwing his gaze down at the floor.

In his periphery, Bucky lights up like a Christmas tree. “Yeah?” he asks, but instead of letting Gale answer, he leans in, nudges Gale’s face up with the tip of his handsome nose, and kisses him with firm hands on his waist.

Even as Gale’s body burns like an electrical fire, sparking intermittently and giving off malodorous chemical fumes, it’s so easy to kiss Bucky. He doesn’t think about where he should put his hands or his mouth. He doesn’t think about anything, holding Bucky’s face close.

Bucky’s hands untuck Gale’s uniform shirt to get up underneath it, and he pulls away to ask, “Can I take this off?” in a hoarse voice.

Gale blinks, trying to gather his thoughts and gather Bucky even closer to him, and then says, “Better not.”

Bucky’s face crumples a little, eyes unfocused as he steps in between Gale’s legs where Gale tugs him. “No? You sure?”

“Good way to get caught,” Gale reasons, kissing him again once. “Leave it.”

Bucky groans and slides his hands up Gale’s sides under the shirt then, thumbs drifting over his chest. “Can I touch you here?” he asks, so polite all of a sudden, maybe just because he wants Gale to tell him what to do.

“Yeah, go ahead,” Gale whispers, fighting to keep his voice steady as Bucky thumbs his nipples and his body jerks forward into the sparkling feeling of it.

He can't help but feel a little irritated at the feminized position, sitting up on the desk with a man between his legs groping his chest like he has tits, but then Bucky ducks to kiss his way down Gale's shirt buttons, hands sliding down to Gale's hips as he gets down on his knees, and Gale forgets to worry about it.

“Can I suck you off?” Bucky asks, his voice low and choked.

Gale is struck silent for a moment, looking down at Bucky's trembling shoulders, the dark top of his head still between Gale's hands.

“No,” Gale tells him impulsively, and Bucky emits a whining groan against his belly that shoots guilt and exhilaration through his guts. “Come up here. Use your hand.”

And Bucky does, jacking him slowly and sweetly, kissing him the whole time, moaning like he's the one getting the handjob.

Gale feels completely liquid with it after, melting into the desk, into Bucky's hands.

“Jesus, look at you,” Bucky mutters, his whole face dark and agitated as he leans Gale back against the wall and leans in to kiss his neck.

The goosebumps spring up across Gale's body in waves, and he physically jolts when Bucky's hard dick bumps up against his softening one.

Both times in Algeria, Bucky had already finished himself off before Gale had the chance to even offer him a hand.

Now, he finally gets his chance, unbuckling his belt, undoing his fly, pulling everything down and out of the way as Bucky backs up to stare at him doing it, mouth falling open.

Christ, it's big, Gale thinks loudly, and he takes Bucky's hot, heavy cock tenderly in his palm, jacking it slowly a couple times as Bucky groans.

“This alright?” he asks belatedly.

Bucky laughs, breathless, pressing closer. “Jesus, whatever you want is

just *fine*, Buck,” he gasps, hips twitching into Gale’s hand like a spring rabbit.

“Turn around,” Gale tells him.

And Bucky does, leaning against him at Gale’s urging, and Gale presses him back harder with one boot heel hooked over his thigh.

It’s new and not new, jacking Bucky off.

His low noises buzz through his broad back against Gale’s chest. He smells of aftershave and pomade and the rain. He braces himself against the desk with one hand and holds Gale’s wrist with the other. When Gale noses the nape of his neck and speeds up, he whimpers, “Buck, Buck, Jesus Christ.”

They don’t bask in the afterglow. By the time they’re done, the sun has gone down and it’s time for chow in the mess.

They clean themselves up. Bucky goes out first, Gale several minutes later.

They spend the night sleeping side by side as always, close but not close enough to touch.

Usually, it goes something like that.

Cards, closet, come.

Gale finds himself regularly saying shit like, “Yeah, you stay down there and take it, John,” while Bucky sucks him off.

Bucky likes sucking cock more than Gale thought was possible. Gale sometimes says no, so they can do something else instead, but Bucky always offers. He always wants to get Gale off first, seemingly because seeing him afterward is what does it for him.

They’ve christened Gale’s new fort a few times over, they’ve memorized the schedules of the other officers to know when they’ll be alone in the barracks, they’ve gone out and roughed it in the woods behind the base— but their old-reliable is that particular closet in the back corner of the equipment shed.

Sometimes Bucky still has to sweet talk Gale, comfort him like a skittish horse, tell him it'll be okay afterward so that Gale won't call the whole thing off in the frightening clarity that follows.

Sometimes Gale just says no. He can't always say yes or he'll never stop saying yes. Maybe if he only says it occasionally, the universe won't notice. Maybe if they feather all the props, their momentum won't stall out. If they keep it quiet and sporadic, maybe the ground will forget to come up and meet them at all.

Other times, Gale can't keep his hands to himself long enough for Bucky to start convincing him.

Once, they almost get caught.

They're not usually stupid, and they're in the least strictly regulated bomb group in the US Army Air Forces, so it shouldn't be all that hard for them to find a place to themselves, really.

The problem is that sometimes Gale *is* stupid. Sometimes Bucky makes him stupid. The whole goddamn situation is stupid.

Gale drags Bucky out of the Thorpe Abbots village pub by his jacket collar one night.

"We got a problem, Major?" Bucky asks, barely comprehensible through his soused laughter.

"Absolutely, we've got a goddamn problem," Gale mutters back, yanking him down the alleyway.

The problem is that Bucky has been surreptitiously groping Gale's thigh under the table instead of flirting with the girls at the bar like he's supposed to.

The streets of the village are narrow and dark and old, buildings built in front of buildings, filled with unintended divots and indents and dark corners that the men have been making frequent use of since they got here.

Tonight, Gale shoves Bucky into one of them, cornering him.

"You don't want to go someplace else?" Bucky whispers, still cackling.

“Right here, Egan,” Gale replies, shoving him down to his knees between Gale and the brick wall.

Bucky lands hard but smiles up at him, dazed, like Gale just whispered something unbearably sweet into his ear.

At least Bucky’s drunk. Gale has no excuse at all.

Just that it’s so good.

It’s always so fucking good.

Bucky relaxes and lets Gale use his mouth like he doesn’t need it to breathe, and so after, Gale thinks he deserves a reward.

Second to giving blowjobs, Bucky’s favorite thing is to lift Gale’s leg up and rub himself against the divot he reveals, where Gale’s thigh meets his groin, in through his open pants and pushed-down underwear, and sometimes, after Bucky has sucked his dick or laid vulnerably underneath him for long enough, Gale even lets him do it.

Only this time, while Bucky is humping him like a dog, someone walks by— two someones— a girl and a guy, obviously, off to find their own little corner.

Bucky’s hand suddenly shoots up to Gale’s throat and pushes him back against the wall.

They go absolutely stock still in the dark, strung tight as bowstrings.

Gale’s whole life flashes through his head.

And then...they just aren’t noticed.

The couple, giggling together, fade off into the distance down the road like Major Cleven and Major Egan didn’t almost just end both of their careers.

Bucky’s huge hand relaxes around Gale’s neck, and Gale shoves him off, rushing to do up his fly. “The hell are you doing?” he asks.

Bucky blinks slowly, hard cock still hanging out until Gale tucks it back in for him. “Nothin’. I was just—”

Head spinning like a nine cylinder engine, Gale takes stock of how they would’ve looked from the perspective of a passerby, and the realization sinks into him like lead.

Bucky was trying to make it look like he was forcing Gale into it.

“Do *not* do that,” Gale growls, shoving him back another step.

Bucky glances up from where Gale has done up his slacks for him, and suddenly looks amused.

“You’re not allowed to do that,” Gale tells him desperately.

Bucky laughs his way into a grin and raises his eyebrows. “You worried about me, Buck?” he asks. “That’s adorable.”

Gale just stares at him, willing him to understand. What he should be doing right now is saying, “This is done. We can’t do this anymore. It’s not safe,” but he isn’t saying anything.

Bucky purses his lips around his smile and shakes his head, like he finds it shocking and endearing that Gale would care about him throwing his entire life away.

Finally, Gale runs a hand through his own hair, shaking his head as he leans back against the wall, knees quaking suddenly. “That was— I shouldn’t have asked you to—” He gets a toothpick out of his pocket with a trembling hand and vises it between his teeth. “I’m sorry, John,” he grinds out.

Bucky sighs, looking out down the alleyway. “Coulda been worse!” he says breezily. “Just gotta be more careful next time.” And after a pause, “I shouldn’t have riled you up.”

Gale considers, like he has on occasion, that they could probably do what the rest of the guys do when they want to go to bed with a local, get a room at the inn above the pub for the night. If they varied their arrivals, no one would be any the wiser. They could get naked for once, really take their time, sleep together afterward. But he doesn’t dare suggest it.

Sometimes Gale even casts his mind back to their little dorm room in Texas, where they could have been alone together for hours at a time.

Did he really not want Bucky then like he does now? It didn’t used to matter what happened inside his traitorous stomach, but now there’s an answer to it. Bucky smiles at him and Gale feels dumb and jittery, and then later he gets to grab Bucky up and kiss his fool mouth all he wants.

“You wanna head back to base?” Gale asks him. Maybe he can make it up to him someplace safer.

Bucky shakes his head. “I want to get rip-roaring drunk, is what I want,” he says. He’s already drunk, so he must be as upset as Gale is, but he just pats him amicably on the shoulder. “See you back at barracks, Buck.”

When he sees Gale later it’s with a split lip and bruised knuckles.

As summer ends and autumn seeps in, life gets stranger and stranger.

Where the hell is everyone? is something Gale thinks occasionally. He looks around the base where he’s spent the past few months and doesn’t recognize more than half of the people he sees.

The new recruits see Bucky and Gale and think of them as legends, old men, unkillable veterans. They want to be like them and mostly die before they ever get the chance.

No one knows anything is strange about the way their majors are acting, because the people who would know are mostly all gone, and Gale and Bucky aren’t clueless enough to be truly obvious.

But, of course, things *are* different.

For one, they spend an unprecedented amount of time together and absent. Playing cards somewhere, ostensibly.

They might have needed a private niche to themselves for a few hours to get started, but after Algeria, everywhere is fair game, long as they have a moment alone.

They don’t remove more clothes than necessary, they don’t take chances after that night in the village, they get each other off in the most efficient manner, but it’s entirely electrifying. Gale does nothing but keep it in bounds, but it spills out over everything anyway.

It buzzes, abrasive, through every fiber of his being.

He thinks about it in the air sometimes, when all he should think about is dropping his payload, and he thinks about it on the ground, *all* the time, between briefings and interrogations and writing letters

to families of guys who died and eating lunch. It all mixes together.

When they fool around, Bucky is always groping Gale all over, when they kiss especially, like he can map out Gale's body without seeing it. His hands stray up inside Gale's shirt, his jacket, down his trousers, his waist, his legs, his ass.

But when they're in public, he doesn't touch Gale at all anymore. They stay within reach and don't do any reaching.

Gale misses Bucky constantly, and he can't get away from him.

He sometimes wonders if people might think the Majors are fighting. No one ever says so. Curt would have asked, probably, but there's no need to worry about that now, is there?

If the other officers notice the sudden absence of Bucky's constant nighttime masturbation, maybe they just think he's finally grown a sense of shame. Or that he's too depressed lately to get it up, after losing Curt, or losing Jackson, or Dewey, or Pitman, or Aitken, or Zeb, or McGuinness, or Johnson, or Raring, or Spence, or— Anyway, no one says anything.

Once, when they have an abnormally long time alone, in the empty hut being reset for a huge new group of replacements, after they've already gotten each other off once and rested long enough to get it up again, Gale is the one who gets on his knees.

He feels anxious about it, the way he used to get before a landing back when he was first learning to fly. When he mentioned it to Bucky, back in Texas, Bucky had grinned, shrugged, and said, 'Only way out is through.'

Now, Bucky's looking at him with huge eyes, his mouth dropped open. "Buck," he says. And then snaps his mouth shut and swallows visibly. "This is *not* gonna take long."

Gale feels his brow furrowing hard. He feels familiar uniform fabric under his hands. He feels the floor digging into his kneecaps.

"Don't count on it," he mutters, reaching forward to undo Bucky's trousers.

Bucky throws himself back on the bed with a groan. "I can't look," he laments. And then he sits up again, eyes still wide. "No, I gotta look."

It makes Gale smile in spite of himself. "Relax, would you?"

Bucky laughs incredulously back at him. "Relax, the man says! Take a look at yourself, Cleven!"

Gale ducks his head and laughs too, unable to concentrate under the circumstances. His middle feels tingly and warm, jitters gone as suddenly as they came, and he puts one hand up on Bucky's belly, softly caressing him with a thumb.

"Yeah, relax," he says, still smiling, egging him on a bit. "I'll take care of you, John."

But Bucky doesn't react with flushed animal lust like he sometimes does when Gale says patronizing things. He furrows his brow and reaches down to hold Gale's face instead, his thumb brushing through stubble, then touching Gale's lip in a tender echo of what he tried to do before Algeria.

Gale frowns and opens his mouth and takes the head of Bucky's dick inside before Bucky can do more, and Bucky surrenders, biting down on a moan.

He just concentrates on the feeling of it for a while. It's too big for him to do much comfortably, but just the stretch of his mouth feels completely obscene, trying to imitate what he's seen Bucky do so many times and plainly struggling.

When he looks up, Bucky's face pinches like he's in pain, and he whispers, "Jesus, Buck."

And, well, it doesn't take long, like he said.

Afterward, he doesn't see Bucky for hours, not until he slips into the Officer's Quarters completely sauced, stumbling, stopping at Gale's bunk to loudly whisper, "Sweet dreams!"

Things have changed, and Bucky Egan, most mercurial of all, changes too.

He's losing hope, Gale supposes, utterly helpless to do anything about it.

He fights more, drinks more, scowls more. He wants to fool around multiple times a day, which of course Gale has to keep under control for the both of them. It's no problem. That's what he's there for.

The end is in sight, strangely, as their mission tallies approach the 20's, and has also never felt farther away.

Cooper's fort went down at 23 missions, bailed out over enemy territory. Berkovitz exploded in midair at 21.

The odds just keep getting worse, and the losses get bigger and more terrible to watch.

Gale tries to take it all out on the Nazis.

Bucky takes it out on just about everyone but Gale.

Once, Bucky calls Gale for cards and doesn't even try to touch him below the belt.

There's a mission in the morning that eliminates the supply closet as an option, Gale's fort is under repairs, the officer's hut is always milling with the new guys lately, so they meet out past the edge of the base and bike out someplace else even farther, an abandoned farm with a rickety shed at the end of a dirt road into the woods, where Bucky leans Gale against the back side of the shed and sinks in with a sigh for a kiss.

They spent their day with Harding and Jack and the rest of the office brass, sorting out what the hell happened during their last mission over France. They lost five forts after Bucky made the call to salvo and bail after too many mechanical failures, so it became a debate whether that call was the right one or not. It would've been worse if he'd pushed them through, said Gale, but at least they'd have lost all those men for a *reason*, said Bucky.

Bucky always wants to meet up somewhere after a disagreement, without fail, and this time Gale happens to have said yes.

They kiss against the shed for a long, long time, unhurried, and when Gale tries to touch him over his pants, Bucky backs off and shakes his head. "I don't know if I'm really in the mood."

Gale squints at him in the dim, and his face is darkened, cast down. "We biked all the way out here to talk?" he asks.

And Bucky snaps, "Jesus, can't you just be my friend for a second?" like he isn't the one always begging and gagging for it.

'This isn't how I treat my goddamn friends,' Gale wants to say, but he holds it in.

He wants to give Bucky everything he wants, is the problem, and can't. He has to say no to taking off their clothes, but he can say yes to Bucky touching him and kissing him and sucking him. There might be some way out of it, then. He doesn't stay too long after they finish, but he does treat Bucky different than everyone else. He doesn't sleep in Bucky's bed, but he does listen to his quiet snores at night and wish he could. Isn't that worth anything?

Gale says no to a lot, but he does say, "I am your friend, John," finally. "I just thought—"

"Yeah," Bucky says, shuddering as he sits down in the dirt, leaning back against the wood siding. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Gale says, feeling foolish and guilty for being irritated. The annoyance leeches out of him all at once, and he sits down, too.

Bucky takes Gale's hand and holds it between both of his, looking down at it, running his finger across the creases of Gale's palm. "Do you ever wonder if we'd've been friends if we met somewhere else?" he asks.

Gale huffs a chuckle. "Where else could we have possibly met?"

"What if your folks had moved out to Wisconsin, huh?" Bucky asks, wide eyed. "It's not like that's beyond the scope of possibility."

Gale imagines it, moving in next to a big family with a cool older boy who smokes cigarettes and loves baseball, sneaking out to meet him in the mornings before his dad wakes up.

"Don't you have a sister my age?" Gale asks. "Probably sooner have

been friends with her.”

“Ugh, *Lucy*,” Bucky says, like he resents her for something that never happened. “Well, maybe if we’d gone to the same college.”

“Were you hanging around with a lot of freshmen as a senior?”

“I could have,” John says, shrugging. “If it was little Gale Clevon I got to hang around with.”

Gale imagines that too, following Bucky around the green lawns of a college campus like a baby duck, feeling lucky and confused by his attention.

Bucky scowls off into the distance. “Or maybe we’d just be regular old test pilots, flying cargo, working on the government dollar.” He lets go of Gale’s hand and settles back against the shed more comfortably. “Just can’t help thinking this’d all be a lot more fun without a goddamn war in the way.”

Gale looks at him sharply.

The war isn’t *in the way*. The war is the only reason any of this has happened at all. Gale never, *never* would have touched him without the fucking war. No chance.

Still, Gale isn’t stupid enough to not realize what he means. “That’s not what this is, John,” he says around a frog in his throat. It can’t be, or Gale will have to put a stop to it.

Bucky sighs, deflating, leaning his shoulder heavier against Gale’s as a result. “You don’t think I know that?” he asks.

Well, Gale wonders, sometimes.

They go silent for a long while.

“Just don’t die on me, alright, Buck?” Bucky asks eventually.

“I’m not planning on it,” is all Gale can promise him.

Bucky tries to joke, “So far, so good, right?” and Gale agrees with a hum.

“Last two in the air,” Bucky whispers.

He doesn’t sound like he believes it anymore. Maybe he never

believed it.

Maybe he just wants to say, I'm with you to the end, whatever end it is.

It makes Gale sick to read Marge's letters these days, but he devours them all the same.

Dear Gale, she writes in September.

Did I ever tell you about my life plan? I wrote it all out back in the 2nd grade.

Married by 16. Blue ribbon for the pecan pie contest by 18. Five kids by 21. Die at 100.

Isn't that funny? I'm overdue on all my plans except one! I don't know where the war factors into it, or going to college, or the other 79 years I didn't account for. I guess as a kid 21 and 100 seemed like the same thing. It's strange how that is.

Before you moved away from Casper, I was so sure you and I would get married someday, Gale, even though we were little, and I thought getting married just meant we could keep playing pretend every day until we died (at age 100, of course).

Anyways, I miss you, Gale Clevon. I'm thinking of you. I've been thinking of you for a long time.

*Hugs and kisses,
Marge*

It's such a Marge thing to write, transparently angling for what she wants with a sweet little joke and a sweet little story.

Gale reads it a million times, until the folds start splitting and the paper has gone prematurely yellow and stained.

Once, he even reads it in the closet where he and Bucky meet up.

Bucky had gone out drinking but promised, "I'll see you in the morning, huh?" and sure enough, he arrives bright and early, while the sun has barely started to rise, mid-removal of his crush cap, and he grins and sighs at the sight of Gale.

And then looks down at the paper in his hands.

"More letters!" Bucky says, smiling, but his smile is suddenly not the one he uses when he's happy with Gale. "Letters, letters, letters."

He's still buzzed. His eyes hazily track Gale's fingers as he folds the letter up and puts it away.

"What about them, Bucky?" Gale asks exhaustedly.

Bucky nods, pursing his mouth bitterly around that same terrible grin. "Nothing," he says. "I just thought maybe the lovely Miss Marjorie might have moved on to a man with different tastes, that's all."

"Marge isn't that kind of woman," Gale says, his tone warning.

"Course not," Bucky mutters. "And you're not that kind of man." Then, before Gale even processes that enough to respond, Bucky sneers, shaking his head. "You don't think I could go out and fuck someone different every night of the week if I wanted to?"

Gale freezes in place. "I'm not stopping you," he replies, at length.

Bucky laughs. "Oh, you're *not*? That's so strange you would say that, Buck, because all my nights have been booked up lately! I can't seem to pencil in the time!"

There's no point in talking to him when he gets like this, but here is Gale, doing it anyway.

"And whose fault is that?" Gale shoots back. "What are you really mad about? I'm not giving you enough attention?" He feels a bolt of bitterness strike through him. He never spends a minute alone, these days! Bucky doesn't even have the discretion to stay out of Gale's goddamn head! "What do you want me to do, dip you in the middle of the O Club?"

Bucky gawps at him for a moment and then shoots back, "How would you? You don't know how to dance!"

"*You* don't know everything about me."

“Oh, I know you, Gale Cleven,” Bucky promises, showing his teeth. “I know things about you that’d curl Marge’s hair.”

Jesus.

Gale grabs his jacket like he might leave, but Bucky pushes him back against the parachute racks.

“But I don’t know if *you* know *me*,” he says, face falling into a surly glower. He’s taller, and bigger, and heavier, and his elbows rest against the wall on either side of Gale’s head. “You think I’m a domesticated little dog who’s gonna follow you around on a leash forever, Buck, and I think that you’re wrong about that.”

Gale’s heart pounds magma through his veins, but he still lifts his chin to meet Bucky’s gaze.

Bucky looks back just as intense, breath quickening.

“Well, I think it’s lucky for you I like dogs,” Gale says at last.

Bucky bursts out in a surprised laugh that makes Gale smile back at him—in spite of it all—and drops his head, so their foreheads touch briefly.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with that?” Bucky murmurs and doesn’t wait for an answer, kissing Gale with a vengeance, one hand pulling in the small of his back.

If there’s one thing a tipsy, tired John Egan knows how to do, it’s push his luck.

He breaks the kiss for a second to reach down behind Gale’s knee to lift his leg up over Bucky’s hip, only yanking harder when Gale’s instinct is to pull it back down.

Bucky presses in with his whole body, spreading Gale’s legs further, hand unrelentingly pulling the back of his thigh, jabbing his hard cock into the space he’s made, craning up to keep their mouths pressed tightly, and somehow reaching around to grope up between Gale’s legs from behind.

It’s so hot, his huge paw of a hand grabbing at all the most intimate parts of Gale, like everything below his belt belongs to Bucky unquestionably.

Gale grunts but he doesn't push him off, steadying himself with arms wrapped up around Bucky's shoulders instead, pressing their chests close and tight.

The kiss ends as their mouths finally slide apart, and Gale tucks his face into the side of Bucky's hair, trying to stay sane, or at least quiet.

His remaining foot on the ground jumps up humiliatingly onto its toes as Bucky's cock rubs up just behind Gale's, further back, pushing, pushing, pushing, again and again, like it could bore right into him.

"Why won't you just let me take off your clothes?" Bucky growls into his ear, of all things.

"You know why," Gale pants back at him. "Don't be stupid."

Bucky laughs darkly, pulling back to make eye contact. His hands slips out from between Gale's legs and settles in the crook of his waist. "Now you tell me," he says.

Abruptly, he lets go and drops down to his knees to suck him off, pushing Gale over to sit back on the edge of the desk. He practically rips Gale's pants open to get at his dick and just about chokes himself to death in the desperation with which he goes at it.

"Easy," Gale grits out, pushing him back with a grip in the top of his hair.

It gets Bucky hot to suck cock like usual. He's touching himself and groaning inside of a minute.

Not like usual, after Gale has finished and is vulnerably spent, one leg propped to the side against the table, underwear and slacks halfway down his ass, barely able to see straight, Bucky gets up and starts jacking off onto him. He pulls Gale's uniform shirt up to the middle of his chest one-handed.

Bucky's come on him before—lots of times, even—but not this way, on purpose, breathing like an angry animal, rooting around for the right place to aim.

Why is Gale pulling him in closer? Why is he the one getting stupider every time?

He kisses Bucky again, groaning and slack-mouthed, pulling him close with a grip on the back of his sweaty neck, and Bucky whimpers and

starts to come in hot, wet spurts across Gale's stomach and pelvis.

"Jesus Christ," Gale mutters, looking down at the mess.

Bucky looks too, as he zips himself back up, and doesn't stop looking. "How soon can you go again?" he asks after a moment.

Gale scoffs a laugh and kicks at Bucky's leg. "Grab me a towel, would you?"

Instead, Bucky kisses him again, sticking a hand down into his own come and spreading it across Gale's belly with trailing knuckles, down into his pubic hair. "Don't want to," he mutters into the space between them. "I should keep you like this 'til the orderlies come in."

Gale suddenly also wonders how soon he could go again, and then hisses as Bucky's wandering hand rubs his sensitive dick. "*John*," he croaks, cringing away.

Bucky blinks at him, and he smiles at whatever desperate, completely undone thing must be written across Gale's face.

"Don't worry, Buck," he murmurs, patting Gale's side with his dry hand. "I'll take care of you."

And he does, then, toweling Gale off as best he can and stowing him gently away in his underwear. Gale tries to do up his own pants, to stave off the misplaced intimacy of the moment, but Bucky nudges his hands away, tucking Gale's shirt neatly, zipping, buttoning, and buckling, and then Bucky leans down and buries his face in Gale's stomach, just above his waistband, taking in a deep breath, trying to smell himself under the Army-issue uniform.

Whatever whiff he catches has him looking mighty satisfied when he straightens back up, but a second later his face turns stormy and he warns, "Don't say it."

"Down, boy," says Gale, unable to hold in a breathless laugh.

Later that morning, Glen Dye completes his 25th mission.

In the afternoon, Bucky begs for another quickie and Gale has regained his senses enough to turn him down.

In the evening, Bucky goes too far with all his jokes and implies the new replacements are as good as dead and almost fistfights their fucking CO. He invites Gale to go with him to London even though Gale will of course say no.

And Gale says no, of course. But he does dance around the Officer's Club with the goddamn dog, so at least there's that to think of in the months that follow.

Chapter End Notes

BY GOD, THIS CHAPTER ALMOST DEFEATED ME..... it wasn't originally supposed to exist and now it's soooooo long and so i will just have to fix it later because THERE'S NO TIME! I HAVE TO GET TO THE END ASAP AAAAAAA

anyway, if bucky's love language is sucking dick and buck's love language is being withholding, then i guess in that sense they are in a very normal non-complex relationship right now :)

also thank you all SO MUCH for the lovely comments!!!!!! they are literally feeding me and motivating me and causing me to cry and scream every day in a good way.

preview:

▼ 🇩🇪 5. Germany

- 📄 before bucky arrives
- 📄 another homophobic handshake ofc
- 📄 bucky goes in for a lil kissy
- 📄 fall
- 📄 winter
- 📄 letters from marge
- 📄 spring
- 📄 letters from marge
- 📄 summer
- 📄 fall again by jove - sick
- 📄 letters from marge
- 📄 fuckin winter again
- 📄 snuggliez
- 📄 separation!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Germany

Chapter Notes

YES the stalag chapter is now two parts and YES i am furious about it. if anyone sees the chapter count go up again after this, i'm gonna need them to mercy-kill me immediately.

anyway here is part 1.

also of note: stalag luft iii was in a part of poland that was considered "germany" at the time... but yeah, most of lower silesia is in poland, to my understanding.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Gale and Bucky share a combine at Stalag Luft III; Gale makes sure of it.

After he gets processed into the camp, Gale has a meeting with Lieutenant Colonel Clark, Deputy Kommandant Simoleit, and the rest of the high-ranking brass to discuss the way they manage their men in the Stalag. Gale hadn't really considered his officership extending this far, but it follows that it would, and so he takes it on his shoulders too, his body still aching and flaring up with wounds and bruises. He'd had a face full of plane shrapnel after they got hit, and the German farmer who found him got him good with a pitchfork.

Strangely enough, even the Nazis call him Buck Cleven.

Maybe they think nobody calls him Gale, like a Thomas who goes by Tom. No one does call him Gale, on this side of the Atlantic anyway, but he still wants to say, Don't call me that. That's not my name. Stupid as that is in the face of the Third fucking Reich.

Lt. Col. Clark keeps saying things like 'after the war' and 'terms of release,' and he shows Gale around the place like it's a beach resort:

the library, the mess, the barracks, the— post office.

“Red Cross gets mail through every couple months or so,” he says with a grave sort of smile.

Mail. Books. After.

The odds have suddenly changed, maybe even for the better. Gale tries to let that sink in, but it won't, for some reason.

Nothing sinks.

Gale is somehow still floating over Germany, bruising against nylon straps around his legs and torso.

Most of the rest of Gale's crew shows up a few days later, and Crank and Brady are with them, asking Gale if he's seen Bucky yet.

It stops Gale short, but it doesn't quite reach him.

He blinks like he's dreaming or drunk or deep underwater.

“Bucky... He went down?” Gale asks slowly.

Crank and Brady exchange glances. They look exhausted and dirty, dark circles under their red rimmed eyes. Brady's cheek is bruised.

Gale wonders how he looks to them, suddenly, cut up and dazed and bracing himself against the railing at the news.

“Four days ago, by my count,” Brady says. “He's not here?”

Every sentence is a new blow.

Crank mutters, “Christ, we thought it took *us* a long time to get ported over.”

“You're sure he got out?” Gale asks, his mouth full of phantom cotton.

Brady nods severely. “I watched his chute inflate,” he says and then turns immediately to Crank like he didn't just throw Gale a pivotal lifeline. “Maybe he's at a different camp?”

Gale shakes his head. “They organize us— by squadron.” Suddenly he can’t stand anymore, and he ends up sitting down on the block stairs with a thump. “Some strategy,” he adds, staring at the mud between his boots. “Get us together with our buddies to make escape plans.”

He keeps his head down for a while, and when he finally looks up, Crank and Brady look real worried all of a sudden.

“I’m sure Major Egan is fine,” Gale gets himself to promise. “He’s a survivor. He’ll make it.”

Brady mutters, “You didn’t see what he was like after you went down,” and Crank smacks him hard in the chest, snapping, “Read the fucking table!”

Survivors from the Munster mission continue to trickle in for a few days and then stop.

Gale drifts.

Their combine is a square room walled in with cedar. The narrow bunks line every wall, and in the middle a squat little table is surrounded by squat little chairs.

Gale sets up Bucky’s bunk for him, just opposite Gale’s, middle bed by the window, best seat in the house.

He convinces Clark himself to requisition an early pillow and bedding for the empty bed and ignores his pitying look.

He doesn’t think about the logical explanation. It doesn’t even occur to him.

And then John Egan walks into camp with a new jacket and an old familiar grin, and it’s like the goddamn lights turn back on.

Bucky and Gale shake hands when they get near enough to touch, after the Krauts bring him back from processing, clean-up, and delousing.

Bucky's hand, like the rest of him, is wounded but already healing, something that must have happened days ago.

His movie star smile is still the same, bright and lovely in the midst of his mottled face, his bloodshot eye, the gray terror tedium of the camp. He looks so fragile and so, so dear, raw and torn open like a rotten, foul wound, and grinning like a loon.

When he walked in, his hair was crusted with blood. Gale could see it, even from a distance. After washing up, without its usual coating of pomade, it looks soft and puffy as a cloud. He looks older, but he also looks younger.

He can't be here, but he's here. He's the same Bucky who has been Gale's friend for years, who slows down his fort to wait for stragglers, who has until very recently been sucking Gale's dick like it's his job. Same guy.

There's a feeling in Gale's body like all his bones are pushing on each other, that his body is pushing on the ground through his boots. Everything feels disconnected here, but he is connected, at least, to the Earth underneath him.

"You're shaking like a leaf, Buck," Bucky points out, savagely casual, grabbing Gale's arm with the hand not already clasped in his. "What are they feeding you poor schmucks around here?"

"Rib-eye steak and Florida oranges," Gale rejoins with a stomach full of turnip mash. He jerks his head toward the sad grid of sooty domiciles. "Come on in, John. I'll show you around."

The moment he gets Gale alone, Bucky goes in for a kiss.

Gale's supposed to just be showing him their room, but he closed the curtains and asked Benny to watch the door, so that he can catch Bucky up on brass business, like there's any real business going on in here.

He stops Bucky up with a hand on his chest, which is right here, close to him, breathing up and down, containing a heart that still beats and struggles and stays open when it really shouldn't do.

“We—” Gale struggles to get it out. His throat closes up. “We shouldn’t.”

Bucky’s smile falls slowly.

He just looks plain confused.

“I thought you were dead, Buck,” he says in place of a question. His eye twitches slightly when he frowns, like it hurts him to make that expression.

Who the fuck did that to you? Gale thinks for the hundredth time today as he looks at Bucky’s face, his swollen eye socket and burst blood vessels. He can’t seem to get out the question, afraid of the answer, like it might kill him to know exactly what happened over the past two weeks if he can’t kill the bastards who did it, and Bucky is looking back at him like maybe he feels— well, something similar.

“I thought you were *dead*,” Bucky repeats, hatefully mournful, reaching for him again.

Gale finds he can’t deny him twice in a row.

They kiss, finally.

It’s not the kiss that Gale would have expected, full of the tongue and teeth and desperation of two people wrenched apart by the cruelty of war.

Bucky cradles Gale’s head between his hands softer than he ever has, and leans in slower than ever, too, eyes open and searching his face until they flutter shut at the feeling of their lips meeting softly, sweetly.

It feels lovely. It aches.

Then, in the next moment, Bucky breaks the kiss and clutches Gale hard in his arms, which hurts the harness bruises and the puncture wounds in his chest, but that pain feels good, too. He’s alive. They’re alive. Bucky sticks his nose into Gale’s collar and just breathes.

Gale holds him back more tenderly, careful of his contusions and fractures, but he sneaks his hands in under Bucky’s leather jacket to feel his body, just gently over his shirt, to make sure everything’s still where Gale left it.

"I can't believe you're really here," Bucky mutters wretchedly into Gale's neck.

"Think I know what you mean," Gale says, rubbing up and down Bucky's back under his jacket.

Bucky gives a strange sound, nearly a whimper, as he clings.

They stay that way for a long while, swaying back and forth like a slow dance, silent as an empty grave.

Maybe Benny thinks they're looking at documents or communicating in sign like ground soldiers. Maybe Benny's not thinking anything.

Gale is used to touching Marge like this, or occasionally his mother, but it's strange to hold another person standing up and feel small. It hasn't been like that for a long time.

For all their fumbling and fucking around in England, they didn't do much of this, embracing like sweethearts without even kissing to break it up.

Bucky feels huge against him, tall and broad and warm.

Eventually, something in Gale says no to it. He nudges Bucky gently back, clasping his arms and drinking in his dear face.

"I'm not dead, John," Gale says. "Neither are you."

Bucky gives a shadow of a smile again, taking this as a chance to get another kiss, but Gale holds him off.

"Bucky," he says.

"*Buck*," Bucky replies, like a warning mother.

"This is the longest I've been alone since before I went up," Gale tells him, and then swallows with difficulty. Clears his throat. "We've gotta be officers, still."

Bucky gives an thoughtless laugh, continuing to caress either side of Gale's face. "So? Did the war end when I wasn't paying attention?"

The main problem here is that he's still Bucky. He's still handsome and funny and charming, and Gale still wants to have him, and he still can't. Especially not now.

“For us it did,” Gale says, pulling Bucky’s hands from his face.

Bucky frowns, and they stand there staring at each other, holding both hands between them for a long while as he absorbs this knowledge.

He looks to Gale like a little boy for a moment, repressing his petulant sob at having his favorite toy taken away, but he also somehow looks like an old man, a friend from years ago who Gale hardly recognizes anymore.

Gale wants to give him what he wants, but he won’t. He’s not even allowed to.

Bucky must see something strange in his face, because he softens all at once and asks, serious, “What do we need to do?”

“I need you to be my friend,” Gale grinds out. “Can you do that?”

Bucky nods sharply as if to say, Understood, Major. “I *am* your friend, Buck.”

He squeezes Gale’s hands once before he lets go.

His eye twitches under his frown again, raw injured muscle tissue unwilling to listen.

Gale is overcome with the urge to do something for him, to make things a little easier, so he goes over to the bed by the window and pats the mattress. “Got your bed set up for you— Next to mine, since I’m already used to your snoring.”

Bucky comes over to inspect it, eyes flicking over to Gale with the world’s smallest smile. “Sleeping cheek to cheek with Major Clevon, huh? That’s a prime piece of real estate. Must’ve really missed me.”

Gale scoffs. “Like I’d miss a hangnail, maybe.”

But of course Gale was missing him, like a lung or a heart chamber. Gale’s still missing him.

Bucky looks back at him again, and his face creases. “Just one more, huh?” he says, and comes close.

He gets Gale by his waist this time, and Gale steps in, even as his stomach clenches in a hot tangle of dread.

Just one more.

Gale's father used to wean himself off booze sometimes, trying to quit without giving himself seizure fits. He'd throw everything out but one last bottle of scotch, and then he'd measure out the doses like medicine. Sometimes, he'd give the bottle to Gale to safeguard, placing it in his hands gingerly, a holy relic to only bring out when he'd begged with enough sincerity for 'Just one more sip.'

He'd smile at Gale around his pipe, and his eyes would crinkle fondly, and he'd say, 'This time I feel it.'

And Gale, sweet and young, would ask him, hands on his hips in the kitchen, 'Well, how do you know, Pop?'

'Knowing and feeling are two different things, Gale,' his father would say, laughing, and three days later he'd be sloppy drunk pissing the grocery money away on horses.

What Gale feels is Bucky's tongue slowly licking into his mouth, Bucky's hand sliding softly up his waist, Bucky's mustache tickling his nose, Bucky's breath on his face, his gruff little groan that sends a jolt of arousal down to Gale's cock.

What Gale knows is that he has to get everyone through this, including himself, including Bucky, if it comes to it.

He forces every cell in his body to freeze and redirect, and he steps back.

"I think maybe we take it as an opportunity, John," Gale says, eyes still closed under a painful scowl.

Bucky doesn't respond.

Gale opens his eyes, and Bucky is there, eyebrows turned up in the middle, eyes big and sparkling, mouth red and kissed.

"We'd have to stop to go home anyways," Gale forces.

Better this than cold turkey, he thinks wildly, eyes still locked on Bucky's sweet mouth. Better to ease off stuck together than go straight back to Marge with Bucky's come still rubbed in on his stomach.

Bucky's face morphs in disbelief and anger.

"Well, why didn't *I* think of that? What a fucking opportunity this is!" he snaps, and heaves himself up into the bunk Gale picked out for

him, close enough to touch.

There's no point in talking to him when he's like this, is there?

Gale doesn't try, today. He's too agitated. He's happy. He's sad. He's irritated. He's so relieved he could cry. Everything is disconnected.

Numbly, he drifts over to tap the door to signal to Benny that it's alright to come back in.

Benny bursts in right away, grinning wildly, and calls back to some of the others loitering around the hall.

They all gather around Bucky's bunk for the story of his arrival and his delay, which he summarizes with a flippant, "Took a hell of a detour, fellas. Got hit. Don't even remember half of it."

They keep saying things like, "We thought you were *toast*, Bucky," and Gale wants to tell them to shut it, but he doesn't say anything, leaning against the wall by the window, wishing for a toothpick.

Eventually, when the men wander off, having gotten their fill of Bucky dodging their questions and making them laugh, Bucky turns his head and looks at Gale from over his forearm on his pillow. "So, that was it," he says hoarsely.

Gale doesn't trust himself to speak, but he makes his head move in some approximation of a nod.

That was it.

There are lice and biting flies, shit stink and mud and potatoes, but to everyone's surprise, life continues.

Classes are taught at the library every afternoon; Glen is fixing to pick up the basics of a pre-law degree. A couple of the boys from the 392nd start up a radio show that broadcasts over the speakers every other evening. The Brits have a soccer league and a set of vegetable gardens behind their huts. There's a kriegie theater company and a kriegie currency and a kriegie newspaper in which they have a contest for who can get the cutest picture of their chubby little baby mailed in.

Gale wakes up early, next to Bucky as usual, and hauls himself out of his bunk with an aching shoulder where it leaned against the bedrail all night.

Bucky sleeps with his mustached mouth mushed into his pillow, big feet in threadbare socks hanging sideways out of his bunk. The small cabin window beams light down on the brown curls on the back of his head, making them shine in the dawn twilight. He snores just softly.

Gale cracks a window to air out the stuffiness and throws Bucky's blanket back on him where he's kicked it onto the floor.

He puts on the same flight uniform he's been wearing since he got here, and steps out to wash his face at the latrines, shaves with barely enough soap, combs ineffectually at his greasy hair, trying to get it to lie in a way that pleases him.

He collects morning Reich Rations from the cookhouse and hauls them to the cabin for breakfast.

By the time he gets back, Bucky and some of the others are upright, and Bucky shoots Gale an ironic smile and says in his raspy, whiny morning voice, "Mornin', sunshine. I sleep in?" like old times.

The first few nights, Bucky passes out early from sheer exhaustion, but about a week in, he seems to have come to terms with the creature comforts of their new bedroom.

Gale listens to him shift restlessly on the thin, grating mattress, the bed not big enough for him, not long enough by about a mile. He turns left; he turns right; he ends up flipping his pillow to the other end of the bed to sleep with his head away from the window, across from Gale's.

After the twelfth time he rolls over in a minute, Bucky mutters, "What's the point of giving us beds if they're stuffed with coat hangers and fucking silverware?"

Somewhere below, Hambone gives a wheezy laugh in the dark.

"You could take the floor," Gale suggests in a whisper, smiling at Bucky's little joke in spite of everything. He's here. He's alive. He's

grouchy and funny.

Bucky pops his head up then, and Gale cranes on his pillow to see the outline of his curly hair illuminated by the moonlight.

“What, and miss out on the pleasure of your company?” Bucky whispers back.

Hambone laughs again, and so does Solly, this time.

Bucky, up on one elbow now, reaches out across the space between their bunks to touch Gale’s shoulder over his longjohns. It’s a strange gesture, more of a prod than a caress, and next his hand touches Gale’s forehead, and then his hair, which he delicately combs back before leaving his hand entwined in it.

Quitting’s not easy, as Gale’s learned, but it’ll be worth it. Things happen at the time they’re supposed to happen. He’s alive. Bucky’s alive. He’s going to be Bucky’s friend, the way he ought to have been this whole time, because that’s all they’ve got in here.

Bucky doesn’t make it easy, but it’ll be worth it.

Gale puts himself to sleep by imagining that the hand in his hair might slide down to his chest, or even lower, that Bucky might crawl into his bed and lie on top of him, an inescapable, hulking, burdensome comfort.

When Gale wakes up the next morning, Bucky’s hand is still resting on his pillow, his arm bent at an odd angle across the gap, and Gale lets himself take the time to tuck Bucky’s warm limb back in under his blanket, to which Bucky responds with a sleepy groan.

Just one more sip, Gale thinks sourly.

As everyone settles in for the long haul and realizes this is the most privacy they’re likely to get for a long good while, they all give up on the appearance of dignity and self-celibacy. Most nights are filled with repetitive shuffling that they pretend they never heard in the morning. They’ve all been sharing bunks for a long time, but at least back in England there were other places to do it, or other people to do it with.

Gale tries to wait for the busier nights to jack himself off, when maybe no one can distinguish who's doing what. Bucky can probably tell, but Bucky's heard worse, and he's usually going at it at the same time, so who knows what he's noticing.

Gale sometimes imagines what he'd would do if Gale got up and climbed into his bunk, or if he just reached over the gap and touched Bucky's stubbly cheek while he trembled and blew out difficult shivering breaths.

It's almost comforting, listening to the familiar sounds of his pleasure, especially when it's followed, as ever, by the same soft snores that have punctuated the end of every day of Gale's life for years.

Bucky takes to the social structure of the camp like he's been here before.

He figures out how to navigate the unofficial routes and the official ones—how to trade for cigarettes and how to trade for Lagergeld, and only a few weeks in, Bucky's got a guy for everything: Tony at the Foodacco who gives him discounts on jam, Chubbs over at the Brit's cookhouse who has a stockpile of Red Cross cigarettes he'll dole out in exchange for digging implements and no questions asked, a goon who works the night shift who'll smuggle in all matter of contraband for pictures of American girls and Lucky Strikes...

Gale feels newly amazed in the face of Bucky's gregarious go-for-it-iveness. He feels a bit like a cadet again, following John Egan around like a lost puppy to help him out with all his social appointments and plans and schemes.

Scrounging for food and fighting for scraps reminds Gale too much of his childhood to really go in on it. The combination of hunger and being the new kid in town and being told what to do brings him back in the worst way.

So, by contrast, he turns his gaze in, to their men's needs and morale, the homesteader to Bucky's hunter.

They work together like they always have, stuck together like hot tar. It just works.

When Solly has a rotten tooth that keeps him up at night, Gale goes with him to hold his hand at the kriegie dentist, and Bucky barter for drugs to help with the pain.

When Benny needs some protein he can actually keep down, Gale makes him soup out of pork loaf cans Bucky trades from the Brits in exchange for his USAAF belt buckle.

When Hambone gets himself in trouble with a group of Norwegians, Gale and Bucky arrive as a pair to sort it all out, good cop bad cop, Gale making uneasy peace with Bucky standing over his shoulder like a guard dog.

Their men—such as they are—look to them to be the center of their life. There's no structure here other than when the Germans want to count them and search for contraband. They watch their Majors for cues on how to live, watching in wonderment as they do it.

Bucky constantly wants to do things for Gale, everything he can, itchy with it, and Gale wants him to know he appreciates the effort, and so strangely, their friendship becomes the most openly kind it's ever been, full of— "I can get that for you, Buck," and "Thanks, John. This is perfect," at every turn.

All day they work and lead and kill time the best way they know how.

And then at night, Bucky will reach over to touch Gale's face, or his hair, or just prop himself up on his chin to look at him with a dark, starry gaze, and Gale will close his eyes and imagine reaching back and think, Maybe it's not even quitting. Maybe this is better.

When winter comes, they run out of wood for the fires early, and then Bucky doesn't even have to reach over anymore. Everyone starts sharing beds for warmth.

No one wants to share with Bucky, of course, since his bed's already too small for him without anyone else in it, and so it's easy for the spot to default to Gale.

They sleep head-to-toe, of course, and on their sides in order to even remotely fit, Bucky by the wall and Gale on the outside, but Bucky will still do things like lean his head against Gale's calf or bend his

knee to fit over Gale's hip, stroking his hand along his leg, snuffling his mustache around his bare ankle under the blanket.

Bucky is warm and hot and huge, the furnace of his body a life-saving balm, but Gale still feels like he spends more time in the winter pretending to sleep than really doing it, trying to make his body lay in such a way that Bucky won't notice he's awake, or that he's shaking, or that he's hard— whatever the case may be.

And then one morning Gale wakes up and nudges Bucky back toward the wall from where he had been wrapped up around Gale, and it wakes him up, and he squints in the wintry morning darkness and whispers, amidst the sleep murmurs and snores around them, "You know, you hold your breath when you pretend to sleep, Buck."

Gale goes still, halfway through gathering his things to take them to the washroom.

"What?" he whispers back.

Bucky closes his eyes again, rubbing at his tired, sleep swollen face. "You hold your breath," he rasps out. "You always have."

Strange. It's something like pushing on a bruise, to hear that.

It's just disconcerting, Gale settles on, feeling wrong footed as he goes about his daily routine, that while he was learning everything about Bucky, Bucky was learning everything about him, too.

They walk the camp, looking for anything of note, Kraut blind spots, men out of sorts, possibilities for trade, and they talk.

They've never talked so much in all the time they've known each other, especially not lately, when their mouths have spent every moment alone together not talking.

They gossip like old maids about which guys are cross with each other and which ones have found new buddies. They speculate about the home lives of the goons. They strategize about how to get the best treatment for their men out of the Kommandant.

Bucky teaches Gale all the rules of baseball, even though it bores Gale

to tears.

Gale tells Bucky tales from across the American countryside that only the child of strange parents on the run from debt collectors might have— those two old guys who lived in the woods in Alabama and wore branches on their heads, the ranchers in South Dakota whose toddlers rode around their farm on the back of a brown sow, the Wyoming winter his dad learned knitting from his mom and made a blue scarf for Gale.

They tell each other boring things and interesting ones. They talk and talk.

Occasionally, Bucky will wax poetic on which guys in camp he thinks are queer, like it's a harmless hobby to consider it, even though it always makes Gale's sick and uncomfortable and silent. Bucky's especially fixated on one of the kriegie doctors, the Scottish preacher who gives protestant sermons, and a guy they know from the 385th, plus a couple of particularly cozy goons. "All in good fun, Buck," Bucky assures him. "S'not all that easy to tell, really." Small mercies.

Sometimes Gale can go for a whole day without remembering that he's ever touched Bucky anywhere untoward, and other times the specter of what they did in England stands in the room with them like an extra member of the squadron.

Reminders come up at odd times.

During their millionth game of Spades in a week, Hambone goes, "Say, Bucky, why don't you ever wanna play?"

Bucky's lying sideways on his bed, idly reading through some tattered whodunnit from the library, and he glances over at the interruption with raised eyebrows.

"Bucky here hates any card game that's not played for money," Gale answers for him.

Brady perks up from where he'd been sourly lamenting getting put on Gale's Spades team, and he scowls in confusion. "What d'you mean Bucky hates cards?" Brady asks, and Gale realizes his mistake, breaking out in an instant sweat under his coat and scarf and boots as

his soul opens up in a frigid downward freefall of fear, but Brady just keeps going: “Bucky *loves* cards. You and Bucky did nothing but play cards for...” He squints as if trying to remember, and then trails off as Bucky bursts out cackling in his bunk.

“Yeah, and Buck trounced me so often I swore off them for life!” Bucky tells him, as easy as if it were the truth.

He catches Gale’s eye for half of a terrible second before he goes back to reading, flipping to the next page with gusto.

“No more cards for me,” he mutters into his book.

Brady is still eyeing Gale skeptically. “You’re not even that good,” he says.

Gale blows out a chuckle that barely shakes at all. “Yeah, well, Bucky’s just that bad.”

Winter in Germany ekes in by degrees, the ice and snow creeping in overnight and receding just as quickly, wet and cold, and then before any of them know it winter proper sets in.

In windy Wyoming, winter tended to descend all at once, blown in from Canada or even farther north than that.

Marge had written about it in her letters during the hottest part of summer in Texas, like she was longing for the cold. She’ll be starting her last semester at college soon, then heading back to Wyoming to stay with her parents for a while.

Gale hasn’t gotten a letter from her for three months.

It’s not typical to go this long between deliveries, Clark tells him, but the war is getting worse.

No kidding.

No mail. No Red Cross parcels. Nothing in or out of the stalag but the snow and blistering wind.

Marge would have received his marriage proposal followed shortly by a Missing In Action notice, probably from some schmuck who knows

him well enough to write him a whole eulogy, and he pities her for it. She must have gotten notice a long while ago, too, that Gale's not dead after all. Gale hasn't been dead for months.

Regardless of her answer, he itches for her letters. They kept him grounded. Facing forward.

He wishes he'd kept one in his flight suit, tucking Marge's beautiful dream world in with him in the sky.

Bucky's the one who checks around the camp every morning for updates— new mail, new trades, new goods, new goons, new bribes? — so he's the one who keeps breaking the news that there's no damn mail, no matter how many times Gale asks him.

He talks about it in this low, strange voice that Gale doesn't recognize at first.

"No mail today," he'll say, frowning and quiet, shoulders hunched and hands in his pockets. "Heard there's a war on or something."

He sounds...sympathetic, maybe, but too ironic to be purely kind.

Gale considers, of course, that he might be as jealous of Gale reading Marge's letters as ever, but that doesn't sit right with him either. He's seen Bucky jealous. He knows what it looks like. That's not the whole story.

He wonders for a long while what Bucky means by that voice, and then one day he asks, "Mail?" and Bucky throws his hands up and replies, "You're kidding yourself, Buck," and that's it, completely.

After that, Gale quits asking.

All in all, it takes four months to finally get an answer back to the question he'd sent before Bremen.

She says yes.

She says, *In case you didn't get my last letter, or the one before that, or the one before that: YES!*

Gale reads it several times.

She's underlined 'Yes!' in four different colors of ink.

He distantly remembers her implying he should ask. And asking, certainly, was the right thing to do.

Getting a, 'Yes,' is something else.

"Bad news?" is what Benny says when Gale folds up Marge's letter at last.

Gale looks up at him, completely off-kilter.

Here he is, in Nazi goddamn Germany, across an ocean from Marjorie Spencer, who is his fiancée. She must have sent him other letters before that got lost in the shuffle. She must have been his fiancée for weeks before this, even.

His body goes shivery from his knees to his scalp.

At the table, Bucky is chowing down on some tasteless crust of bread, pretending not to listen, his broad body angled away slightly, eyes locked on the floor.

"Huh?" goes Gale. "No, I— No." He shakes his head and blows into his hands, fingertips tingling with cold. The letter pages flutter noisily with his breath, like a bird flapping its wings against window glass, and the scent of Marge's perfume kicks up in a plume around him.

Benny shrugs and lets it go, just that easy.

Murph eyes him sympathetically. "Mine made me kinda glum, too, if I'm honest. Mom wrote all about Thanksgiving dinner. Turkey. Cousins."

Gale shakes his head again. Then nods. "Yeah," he mindlessly agrees, shoving the letter in his coat pocket. He jerks his chin in a greeting to the room in general. "Fellas," he says, and then he books it outside to get some air.

Gale crouches down back behind the barrack several blocks down, looking out at the distant woods on the other side of the fence.

He's not out of sight, really. The goons in the east watchtower have a full view of his little hiding spot, but at least his men won't come wandering by on accident.

The forest out behind the stalag is dark with evergreens and sharp with leafless branches. Inside it, warm animals are hidden all over, safe from the war and the cold.

It takes maybe fifteen minutes for Bucky to show up, steadfast and dependable, big army boots crunching the frozen mud as he steps close to Gale and leans back against the cabin beside him. The hem of his overcoat brushes Gale's shoulder, and Gale feels his guts squirm queasily.

He pictures tugging Bucky down in the snow and rolling on top of him.

"Not gonna ask?" he mutters, when Bucky doesn't say anything.

"Ask what?" Bucky laughs, kicking his toe against a dirty drift of snow. "I'm sure you'll tell me *exactly* when you decide you want to, Buck."

Gale goes, "Mm."

It's good news. That's the thing. He wants to tell *someone*, so he can see how they react to it, but Bucky won't do it right.

Bucky will react in that same voice he uses when Gale talks about Marge's letters these days, quiet and solemn and insincere, like he's only willing to put up with Gale's delusions out of very serious pity, and Gale will remain unsure as to what *normal* people think about Gale Cleven, soon-to-be-married man.

Bucky's coat brushes by again as he starts digging around in his pockets and produces a pack of smokes and a matchbook.

Gale sighs and stands up, leaning his shoulder against the cabin to watch Bucky light his cigarette with square, callused hands in gloves with the fingertips raggedly snipped.

He has his winter cap on, pulled down over his ears with little tufts of dark hair tendrilling out the edges, but no scarf. His cheeks are ruddy.

He flushes with cold so easy.

After a moment, he turns and leans his shoulder against the cabin siding, too, raising eyebrows at Gale and plucking the cigarette from between his lips to offer it over.

Gale frowns in reply, and Bucky shrugs.

Gale doesn't smoke. Gale doesn't do a lot of things.

But he reaches out to take the cigarette between his pointer finger and thumb, feeling the tightly packed give of the roll, the smooth rasp of the paper. It sends up a lovely curlicue of smoke, the smell of it as familiar as ozone and jet fuel.

He meets Bucky's smiling little eyes as he places it between his lips.

Taste is familiar, too.

Gale's lungs sting after he breathes in, twice so in the cold, and he immediately gives a shuddering cough, turning his head down.

Bucky laughs silently but doesn't make fun, wordlessly taking the cigarette back for another drag.

They stay like that, slowly passing it back and forth as the sun goes down behind the gray canopy of frosty winter clouds, and they just look at each other for a while.

Bucky promised to be Gale's friend, and here he is doing it, his shoulders hunched up, tip of his nose pink, mouth smiling, eyes curving and half-lidded.

Gale never gets sick of looking at Bucky, even after years.

Distantly, he wonders how he's going to manage sleeping in a room without him in it for the rest of his life.

He casts his mind back to Texas, where he would spend hours together with Bucky without ever considering kissing him once. It feels like he must have been flayed open like a gutted trout since then. His insides have been on the outside. Of course he won't be the same fish even if you manage to shove every last entrail back into its place, but what else can he do but try it?

Bucky's wet bottom lip catches on the cigarette for a millisecond the next time he hands it over, and Gale swiftly imagines kissing him,

touching him, making him come, trembling and whimpering in front of God and the forest and all the goons in the tower, and then he stops himself.

Bucky should be there, Gale decides at some point, his head rushing with nicotine. Bucky should be up there with him at the wedding. He might talk all flat and disingenuous and dishonest, but he'll do it if Gale asks him. He always does what Gale asks.

Chapter End Notes

chapter 4: dirty nasty sex acts 7 times in a row

chapter 5: indirect kiss

chapter 6:

- ▼ 🇩🇪 6. Germany
 - bedroom part 2 bed bed boogaloo
 - ☰ spring - escape want
 - ✎ spring - hunger
 - ☰ spring - convince!
 - ☰ letters from marge
 - ✎ summer - fight
 - ☰ summer - dickscussion
 - ☰ fall - sick needs
 - ☰ winter- snuggle needs
 - ☰ winter - freedom needs

Germany

Chapter Notes

warning!!! there's a flashback to an f-slur in this chapter!!!!!!!!!!
take heed!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Gale and Bucky sleep head-to-head in two small bunks for months and months.

The cedar room grows wallpaper in the form of pictures, drawings, and letters from home.

Gale puts Marge's YES! on the bottom of the bed over his head so that he sees it first thing when he wakes up in the morning, to remind him where he's going, that this isn't forever; everything here is only for now.

She sends more letters all the time, now that the mail is finally moving through. It's all wedding plans from here on out, a married future with tiny blond children, their names already considered.

She sounds so hopeful as she tells Gale about the little outfits she'll sew, the places they'll walk with their babies, the colors she's picked for her bridesmaids to wear.

It's wrong to begrudge Marge her small happiness, loyally waiting on a guy like him for years on end, but Gale finds himself doing it anyway.

Hugs and kisses, she signs, as ever.

Marge

In the spring, on the other side of the electric fence wires of Stalag Luft III, the whole world is changing. The Allies are making progress on the Luftwaffe; the Mustangs have turned the tables on them. The Polish have nearly captured Cassino. There's a noisy silence that must be preceding a land invasion.

Inside Stalag Luft III, the only thing that changes is John Egan, mercurial as ever in his long coat and wrinkled shirt. He stalks the edges of the camp, eyes narrow and exhausted. His gaze stays outward all the time.

He still touches Gale's hair, but now sometimes he tugs on it.

He still smiles at Gale in the mornings, but that's the only time he does.

Their men depend on them for stability, and Bucky's visibly running low on the stuff.

In the spring, Bucky wants to escape.

At night, they lie head to head and Bucky whispers his little plans and schemes and nothings into Gale's ear.

"Okay, this's a good one," he'll say, and then proceed to outline the most absurd, suicidal, half-baked, Hollywood escape plan Gale's heard since the night before.

Half the time Bucky doesn't even talk about getting back to the States, or England, or back into the war. He talks like he and Gale will descend into some hither-to undiscovered part of the European wilderness and stay there forever, like they aren't wounded domesticated creatures with no chance of surviving Nazi Germany long enough to ever find another friendly face.

"Imagine it," Bucky will say with a voice full of energy and charisma. "We haul some food cans with us, and we stick to the woods, and—"

And what? Gale wants to ask, but doesn't. Which woods? Which direction?

Gale used to lie on the living room floor next to his father, listening to his dreams for the future. His father wanted to open a restaurant, to become an actor, to buy a farm, to write a book, to move to the city, to move to the country, to move to Canada and live in the woods. He had an exciting plan for every eventuality, a beautiful house with an extra special room for Gale to sleep in.

When he was small, he believed every word, and he'd go to bed dreaming every dream his father dreamed, expecting each one in turn, painfully anticipating its arrival.

As he got older, he'd only allow himself to believe the story up until his father left for the bar or the track, at which point Gale would find somewhere outside to sit and sort it all out, thinking carefully about which parts might have been real and which parts were obviously fake.

"There are worse things in life than being patient," he tells Bucky sometimes.

Bucky lifts up his head to give Gale a grouchy look and says, "You say that, but you're wasting away in here, Buck."

Gale lets out a slow breath. "I've been plenty skinnier than this and got through it fine."

That seems to make Bucky grouchier, if anything, but he gives up for tonight, propping his pillow up on the planks between them to give himself extra foot room and to make it easier to slide one hand up into Gale's bed when everyone's settled down and he's sure neither of them are going to start jacking off.

Bucky's hand sneaks over his shoulder, dips into the collar of his shirt just a smidge.

Gale turns his head so it's caught between his collarbone and his chin and goes to sleep like that, promising himself to sort out which parts of Bucky's latest escape caper were believable in the morning.

Once, in the middle of the night in March, the whole camp turns upside down for a few hours when the Brits escape. The krauts run around like chickens without their heads, in and out of the gate, all

the tommys pointed out at the woods to the north, and Bucky gets ready to run.

The men go stock still, nervously watching Major Egan as he steps into his boots, throws on his jacket, and starts shoveling his last Red Cross reserves into one of the burlap satchels.

Gale peeks back out the window, watching the searchlights flash through the darkness.

The air is thick. No one moves but Bucky, who rips down the photograph of Rita Hayworth he keeps by his bed to take with him.

They're all waiting for Gale to tell them if they're going to follow suit or if they're going to crawl back in bed to try sleeping through the sirens and dogs. Just their hesitation informs him that they think it's a bad idea. Bucky's easy to follow into battle if there's even half a chance at success.

"The hell are you all waiting for?" Bucky hollers, turning to face the rest of them in the darkness. "This is our chance!"

The men don't move.

Gale says, "Bucky."

Bucky meets his eyes, frowning like anything. "Buck."

Maybe Gale should say yes. They *should* try to escape if they get a chance they're likely to survive, if for nothing else than to use up Nazi resources that could be used elsewhere for things more terrible, but the krauts out there— their gait, their panicked, jerky movements— They look ashamed, frightened, and desperate.

The same kind of steely clear mindedness he uses in the sky settles over Gale. He makes his decision.

"I don't like the look of those goons, John," Gale says. "I won't tell you not to go, but—" He shrugs, leaning back against the window. He's staying.

It amounts to the same thing. Bucky won't leave without him in a million years.

He looks at Gale like he knows it, too, face screwing up into a scowl.

"You said you'd be with me if the odds were better," Bucky says,

almost under his breath. “These might be the best odds we’re gonna get.”

Gale sighs. It’s a familiar line of reasoning to him, of course. “Just because they’re better than usual doesn’t mean they’re good enough,” he answers.

Bucky throws himself back into his bunk like a sullen kid.

By April, the Krauts are stealing their rations with regularity and good old fashioned German efficiency.

“No cigarettes in this one either,” Brady mutters, searching the Red Cross burlap.

“Goons got sick of us bribing their guys with ‘em, probably.”

“Ain’t that some kind of war crime? Stealing Red Cross supplies?” Hambone says, shaking his sack upside down as if another can of peas might somehow materialize from it.

“You think the Krauts care about war crimes, Hammy?” Bucky laughs. “That’s funny!”

None of them say what they’ve all noticed, that they’re losing weight, losing energy.

Gale doesn’t know if he should break the news to everyone about hunger. On the second day with no food, the pangs feel like dying. They pulse through your whole body, electric. On the third day, the hunger passes and the exhaustion sets in, like your body has sullenly accepted that food isn’t something that exists anymore.

Gale spent a lot of his life hungry. From ages six to twelve, he never once remembers feeling full. Other kids would bring lunch boxes or go home to eat, and sometimes someone would offer him half a sandwich, and there was no pride strong enough in the world for him to say no, feeling disgusting and pathetic, scrabbling for scraps in the dirt, but better to live like an animal than to die like a person.

Little Margie was the best about sharing, because she made her own lunches, and so she’d make two servings without saying much about

it, just laying out Gale's lunch for him like it was a matter of course.

He didn't complain to his mother, because his mother would go cry herself to sleep in the bedroom and not come out for hours, and he didn't complain to his father, because begging for food and watching him use Gale's lunch money to play poker afterwards would be too much to bear.

Parts of Gale didn't fill in all the way, and he never ended up getting as tall or as broad as his dad. Runt of the family, one way or another.

He got through it.

He had a few tricks.

Sometimes when he knew they wouldn't have another good meal for a while, he'd savor what he had.

He remembers one particular can of peaches that he picked at every day for a week, cutting the crescents into smaller and smaller slices with his spoon, holding the syrupy, tangy little bits of flesh in his cheeks or in under his bottom lip like tobacco, trying to get out every last bit of flavor before swallowing.

Sometimes he'd just look at it, get real close without ever tasting it at all, just taking solace in knowing it was there.

When he does the same thing with his last tin of Red Cross liver pâté, Bucky scowls at him and shoves his own can into Gale's hand.

Bucky looks thinner these days too, but he's still so handsome, even when he can't always shave and his beard grows out a little, even when his hair gets long because the goons took their barber's scissors again, even when he makes himself so angry about being a POW that he works up a sweat.

Sometimes when Gale was stuck without any food for the day, he'd suck the sweat out of his shirt just to taste something. The flavor of it still comforts him, salty and sour.

Sometimes he'd lay flat on the ground with his bones against the floor and imagine he was a piece of driftwood that someone might pick up. He'd pass hours that way. He'd drift. He'd sleep.

Sometimes he'd scrounge for food in the neighbor's trash, hunt squirrels and cats and turtles, plant seeds in the dust next to their

rented ramshackle little houses.

Everything reminds him of being a kid these days.

Gale gets skinny, and Bucky gets strange.

On their walks, he goes closer and closer to the electric fence, peering out at other compounds and the outside world.

He puts his pillow back where it belongs, toward the window, and sleeps that way, head far from Gale's, and doesn't touch him at night anymore.

Full of venom and bitterness, he talks back to the goons more than ever, swearing and sneering every time he gets half a chance.

He keeps wandering around alone lately. He relives old baseball games by himself. He has whole conversations with no one else around. He starts timing these solo excursions for mail call, perhaps so he doesn't have to hear his own name never getting called for mail.

He wants to escape more than ever, even though they know they'll get killed for it now, Geneva Convention be damned. He wants to start an uprising even though he knows the bloody, inevitable result of it. He wants to do absolutely anything other than wait for the Allies they know must be coming. Rather die than wait.

Strangest of all, Bucky starts hanging around the sick quarters a lot, suddenly.

The kriegie doctor who works there is a Canadian called Daniel, and he's a medical student who somehow ended up a pilot over Belgium.

He's one of the guys Bucky always thought was queer.

Bucky used to say Daniel the kriegie doctor had a face like he'd be up for a tumble in private, but he doesn't say that anymore, just disappears off for an hour or two and comes back looking shiftier and distant.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” Gale takes to saying when Bucky gets up to leave the block without him, and Bucky gives him a sarcastic salute on his way out the door.

Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, is what Gale wants to say, but maybe that’s too on the nose. Don’t go fuck Daniel the kriegie doctor because the goons’ll kill you for it, would be more accurate. Don’t go fuck Daniel the kriegie doctor because it makes me want to kill *him* for it.

Maybe Bucky’s not even fucking Daniel. Maybe he’s up there at the South Compound sick quarters whispering sweet nothings to the guys with dysentery and pneumonia. Gale’s certainly not going to ask.

Doesn’t stop him wondering, though.

Before he was with Bucky, Gale used to masturbate in a nearly perfunctory way. He’d close his eyes and try not to picture anything except for the inside of his own hand, to get it over with just so he wouldn’t be hard anymore.

After being with Bucky, everything’s different.

Sometimes now he touches his own chest like Bucky used to do, pinching at his nipples, letting his body light up with chills through his torso and up his back, across his scalp.

He takes his time, holds himself at the edge, teases, enjoys it.

He can’t always keep in his noises, which used to be easy. Even when he was totally alone, he never wanted to make a sound, but now it’s like it always wants to come up out of him. He’s not loud—that would be crazy—but choked little low pitched hums attach themselves to the edges of his breathing.

He wonders if Doctor Daniel does things for Bucky that Gale wouldn’t. Maybe he strips naked and lets Bucky see every vulnerable corner of his body. Maybe he kisses his eyelids and says I love you. Maybe he licks Bucky down past his dick, takes his balls softly in his mouth, mouths back even farther, lifting his massive thigh up and out of the way. Maybe he fucks his ass with his tongue and his fingers and his cock. Maybe Bucky really likes that sort of thing, and only never asked because he knew Gale would say no.

Christ, maybe Daniel even lets Bucky fuck *him*.

Gale utterly perseverates on the thought of it.

He stops waiting for the others to start jacking off before he does. He stops waiting a few nights between bouts. He barely manages to wait for nighttime anymore. Even though he's hungry. Even though he's miserable. He can't stop thinking about it.

Maybe Bucky bends Daniel over the exam table and gets him open with his thick fingers, just the first one already stinging with its girth. And then— His dick is so big. Bucky would have to work at getting him open enough to take the whole thing. He'd have to take his time, really stretch him out, push one of his knees up onto the table. When Gale experiments with getting even one of his own slimmer fingers into his hole—burning with shame and nausea between Dennison in the bunk above him, Hambone below, Bucky in the bed across the gap—it's so tight and sensitive he can't get it in more than an inch. Probably easier with lubricant. Lots of ointments to use in a doctor's office.

Just pushing on his hole with real intent is enough to make Gale come quick, anyways, so he doesn't have the opportunity to try for much more.

Bucky gives him a few complicated morning looks but nothing more than that.

When Gale receives another envelope with Marge's return address on it, Solly quips, "Those must be *some* letters."

It feels like a death knell in more ways than one when Benny DeMarco starts showing signs of vitamin deficiency. He hadn't been able to make himself choke down the sauerkraut or the cat meat all winter and it's finally caught up with him and suddenly he's sleeping seventeen hours a day no matter what he eats.

Gale steps back from Benny's bunk as he dozes off again, calling, "Say, Bucky, think you can get a few vitamin C tablets from the Foodacco?"

A tense silence ensues.

“Oh, I think you can get them yourself for once, Buck,” Bucky mutters, rolling over toward the wall. “Your legs aren’t broken, are they?”

Gale frowns at his back.

That’s not what they do. That’s not the routine they’ve formed over months and months. That’s not how life works in here, he didn’t think.

Crank gives him a helpless eye-rolling look that contains exasperation and discomfort and worry all in one. Everyone keeps giving Gale that look, lately, like they want him to put his dog on a leash.

“I’ll get the tablets for ya, Buck,” Crank snaps, stomping his way out the door.

Silence falls in the room again, just Gale standing there impotently, Benny fast asleep, Bucky pouting in his bed like a baby, staring at the wall.

“You’re scaring them,” Gale says, his voice low and hard. You’re scaring me, he absolutely does not say.

Bucky gives a loud, wild laugh and rolls back over. His eyes are red rimmed and distant. “Oh, we’re talking about it?”

“What’s there to talk about?” Gale asks him. “We’re supposed to be leading our men through it, Bucky, but you’re in a nosedive.”

Bucky swings out of his bunk, whistles a cartoon sound of a bomb dropping and makes a big explosion noise at the end, hands expansive around it. Then he laughs again. “Yeah? Whatcha gonna do about it, Buck?” he asks, eyes wild. “I think I’m sick of being responsible for everyone else. Now on, I’m gonna be responsible for *me*, myself and fucking I.”

I’m sick of being responsible for *you*, he doesn’t say. I’m sick of you being responsible for me.

Gale feels it like a wallop in the gut.

Bucky grabs his jacket and goes to leave Gale here to clean up his mess, probably off to the South Compound to finger the goddamn kriegie doctor again, and Gale just boils over.

“What the hell are you *thinking?*” he yells. Benny barely even stirs. “They could dismiss you, John! This is Germany; they could do a lot

worse, and then tell your family why they did it!”

“Oh, my *family!*” Bucky exclaims, nodding with an aggressive, ironic grin and wide eyes. “You never wondered why my own mother doesn’t write me in here, Buck?”

“Your—” Gale stops dead. “Oh.”

It’s like a stage curtain lifting.

Bucky doesn’t pretend or lie as much as Gale, but he’s a lot better at it when he does.

Gale told Bucky about his father, but what does he know about Bucky’s?

He works in a factory. He used to smack Bucky upside the head if Bucky didn’t do his prayers right. He already knows Bucky sleeps with men. Bucky’s done this before, and gotten caught.

Struck completely silent, Gale wonders how many men Bucky fucked before Gale. It makes his blood boil. He’s not Bucky’s exception like Bucky is Gale’s exception. Bucky’s not just crazy over him. He’s not just fucking the kriegie doctor to make Gale jealous. Bucky’s a queer for real, and Gale is just one of the many men he’s been attracted to. Christ, he’s supposed to be better at being a man than Gale is. He likes sports and sits with his legs open. When Gale’s trying to be more masculine, he’s tried to be more like *Bucky*. The whole world is backwards. He’s kidding himself. He’s hungry. He wants to be sick.

Gale’s head spins. It all mixes together.

“Yeah, *oh*,” Bucky mocks. “Thanks for the advice, though, Saint Cleven. I’ll take that under advisement.”

The idea that anyone could really know John Egan and reject him seems strange and surreal, even given the reason. Gale hasn’t ever considered it once.

Bucky waits for a response for a moment, and when Gale can’t give him one, slams the door on his way out.

In the summer, they fight.

Bucky is a caged animal in every sense these days, not just the usual one. Practically foaming at the mouth, his eyes dart, searching as he stalks around the camp, dog tags and kriegie ID and crucifix clinking together. He's done looking for exits; he'll settle for blood.

He doesn't just argue with Gale about escaping, anymore. He finds a way to argue with him about everything.

The food is bad as always, and when Gale tries his hand at making a stew with some turnips and Red Cross rations, Bucky spits it out and says, "Gee, Buck, you *really* shouldn't have."

The Krauts are worse than ever since the Brits escaped, jumpy and pissed off and trigger happy. A guy from the 385th gets shot in the gut, and Bucky curls his lip and says, "Maybe if he'd been more patient?"

The mail is delayed indefinitely, so Bucky announces to their cabin, "Poor Buck didn't even get Marge's monthly dirty picture."

It's hot. It's so hot and humid, the air soupy with the scent of human waste and soot ash, everyone is testy and exasperated—stripping down to undershirts or less, and Bucky mutters, "More skin than I've seen on you since Africa," which somehow makes Gale angrier than any of it.

He seeks Gale out specifically to needle at him, especially if Gale dares to do something that might make anything the slightest bit easier for anyone. He pushes and fucking pushes, and Gale knows Bucky's hurting, that he's lashing out like a beaten dog rather than the biggest boy in the schoolyard, but it ultimately starts to feel like the same thing as he follows Gale around, doing it nonstop, and when it comes to bullies Gale isn't above fighting back.

After all, he got good at fighting out of pure necessity.

There was something on him that other boys seemed to sense, that he was soft, or vulnerable, or made wrong somehow, and that he needed fixing through violence. He was always so fucking hungry, quiet and tired and stupid with it, but it was more than that. Billy Craven in Wyoming knew it. Peter McNally in Idaho knew it. Even those RAF pilots at the village pub knew it.

Eventually Gale figured out that he had to beat the absolute snot out of someone early on at a new school if he wanted to be left alone, and if he wanted to beat the snot out of someone who was bigger and

taller and stronger, Gale had to be quick and nimble enough to do it.

So he practiced. And he learned.

His father would sadly touch his face and tell him he was going to talk with Gale's teacher when he saw him come home bloody and bruised but would forget by the next morning. Gale didn't put much stock into what he said, anyhow.

No one in the whole world put much stock into what his father said, least of all the dark, dangerous men who would show up on their doorstep demanding repayment.

One more week, he'd always promise. Two more days. One more month. My paycheck. My boss. My wife.

Sometimes he'd say, "Gale, c'mere, sweetheart," and he'd pick Gale up or pull him in front by the shoulders like a shield. "I've got a *kid*," he said once, when Gale was ten. "I'm a father. Look. Just one more week, Paul, please."

And Paul, whoever he was, looked Gale up and down and sneered, "You're gonna have to do better than parading around your little faggot son," and his father didn't argue, didn't send Gale back into the house, just held his shoulders with shaking hands and begged, "*One* more week, Paul. I *promise*," and the next day they packed up and moved to Idaho.

Everyone could see it, back then. Even the way Gale stood still seemed to be wrong.

God, it had been easier to avoid thinking about these things when they were in the war for real, even before, when they were just preparing for it, but lately Gale can never stop thinking about them.

Anyway, eventually his father drank himself to death, and Gale's mother started feeding him every day, and Gale grew and got good at fighting off the guys who tried to kill him on the playground, so ultimately he survived his childhood.

It's with these boyhood fights in mind that he finally cracks Bucky one across the nose out in the yard.

The fight is short, but hot and hard and painful. Bucky twists Gale's leg and slides closer, thigh between Gale's knees, trying to hurt him for the crime of wanting wood for the cookfires. He saw all Gale's

tender bits from the beginning too, but Gale had thought that maybe they were safe with him.

Look again, Gale says with his bruising, bony fist. That softness you saw was a trick of the light.

Bucky scampers off the minute his eyes clear enough to walk straight, and Gale assumes he's gone to lick his wounds until he actually finds him, and Bucky's alone in their room with his cock in his hand.

"Christ," Gale blurts out, door open around him.

Bucky jolts, whipping his head up to look. He's standing by his bunk, trousers halfway down his ass, sweating and straining and hunched. His dick looks wet at the tip already, like maybe he was already hard before... before he got here. When he was out scrabbling with Gale in the dirt.

For a moment he looks chastened, and then he sees who it is and lifts his chin and grinds out, "Well?"

Gale casts a panicked glance back down the hallway for listening ears.

Of course, there's no one. Bucky would have checked before he said that. It's sweltering in the barracks during summer days. Everyone's chased outside by 10 o'clock at the latest.

"Either come in or get out," Bucky tells him.

No one's around.

No one's here.

Gale could stay.

No insulation in the ceiling, Brady says. Roof tar turns the whole place into an oven.

Gale could stay. Just for a minute. He needs to keep everything in order, but he doesn't fucking want to.

Bucky would let him stay.

Bucky would let him do whatever he wanted, and Gale might be angry enough, or desperate enough, or stupid enough to do it.

He just burns, like a petrol-soaked runway, smoking, parched, burnt dry and yet sizzling.

He only wants one quick sip.

Bucky's mouth drops open slightly, and a sweaty curl of hair lies picturesque across his forehead. His chest heaves in his thin white t-shirt, nipples hard and dark through the fabric. The wide head of his cock is pink and wet poking out from his open fist.

Gale's mouth waters abruptly.

Outside, someone shouts, "D-Day!"

Gale steps back and shuts the door in front of him with a loud *click*.

He feels his body over his feet, his feet against the floor, his dick twitching in his underwear, the heat of the cabin, the stupidity of the choice he nearly made washing over him in a gooey, disgusting wave. He used to be able to touch that man. He used to be able to get him off and feel his body every single day. That seems impossible.

"Sorry," he murmurs to the door between them, before realizing he'll have to speak up. "I'm sorry, John," he says again, louder.

The door is silent.

"I shouldn't have hit you," Gale adds, gruff, loud, uncomfortable.

What the hell is he still doing here? He should leave, but somehow he doesn't.

Their men are waiting out in the yard for their majors to kiss and make up— so to speak.

Behind the door, Bucky gives an enormous, angry, frustrated groan, as if the Pinstripes just lost the Big Game right in front of him. Then, there's a few noisy thuds, and the door opens again.

Miracle of miracles, Bucky has his pants back on. He puts one hand up on the door frame over his head.

"Don't be sorry, Buck," he says, eyebrows raised, mouth quirked hard. "I wanted you to."

Gale struggles with that, and then replies, “Just ‘cause you want it doesn’t make it right.”

And Bucky looks at him for a long moment before he laughs and rolls his eyes. He has a bruise forming on the bridge of his nose. “Uh-huh,” he says, moving backward out of the doorway. “Just get in here already.”

Gale doesn’t dare to move.

Bucky throws up his hands. “I’m not gonna jump on you!” he says, which isn’t at all what Gale’s anxious about. “Quit giving me that look.”

Gale finds himself stepping inside, gingerly closing the door behind as Bucky goes over to lean against the bunk.

“Not giving you any look,” Gale says.

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short,” Bucky replies, eyes dull on the ground. “You give me all *kinds* of looks, Major.”

Gale is so, so exhausted. “Don’t talk like that, John,” he mutters.

Bucky snorts. “Too much?”

Gale stares at him desperately, attempting to pierce through his dark hair and read his twisting mind by sheer force of will.

“Why do you hate it so much when I try to make our life easier?” he asks finally, wrung out.

Bucky laughs loud and then snarls, “What do I gotta do to get it through your thick skull, Cleven? This is not a *life*.”

That hurts, oddly.

Gale sits down at the table with a thud.

It *feels* like a life. Maybe it’s shit, but at least they’re together.

Bucky goes on, practically spitting venom, “You always want everything to be *normal normal normal*, but you don’t get that this kind of normal isn’t— It’s not *real*.”

Gale pushes back his hair and realizes his hand is trembling.

“And I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me,” Bucky says, his voice shot, his eyes wide and red. “Sometimes I think you’ve pushed me too far but then it seems like there’s no where far enough you even could. You’ll probably have to kill me if you want to get rid of me.” He looks at Gale like he hates him for it.

Maybe it was all for nothing. Gale has been trying to figure out any sort of way he can keep him, and none of it is going to work.

He grapples for a long while with what to say, but eventually settles on, “I don’t want to kill you, John.” It comes out in a whisper.

Bucky laughs strangely. “Yeah, I bet.” He has his head tilted and his sweaty temple rested against the top bedrail, frowning at Gale like a puzzle he can’t solve. “You are the most stubborn bastard I think I’ve ever met. We’re gonna die here,” he says, not like he’s scared of it, just like it’s a fact, “and you still won’t let me at you.”

Gale can’t fucking figure it. They just *aren’t* in danger of dying any time soon. Mathematically, the odds were so much worse when they were throwing themselves up into thin air in tin cans blasted by shrapnel three times a week, but Bucky never talked like this, then. It was worse, even if it felt better, but he can’t seem to talk Bucky out of it— this evil, lingering idea that they’re all doomed.

Gale only feels doomed when Bucky tries to convince him of it.

“We’re not gonna die here,” he insists.

Bucky doesn’t reply, turning his face down.

“And whatever happened to just—” Gale winces but still says it, “The things men do when there aren’t any women?”

Bucky huffs, humorless. “You thought I was telling the truth about that?”

“I don’t know what I thought,” Gale utters, shaking his head. “But I can’t just— I’m getting married.”

Bucky doesn’t look up at him, but he quietly says, “You’ve been acting like *we’re* married, though. You realize that?”

Everything is disconnected. It all mixes together.

Gale drops his head into his hands. Before he knows it, he’s breathing

so hard he's almost hyperventilating.

It takes several long moments before Bucky uncertainly calls, "Buck?"

Gale shakes his head. "I hate fighting with you," he forces out. "But I don't know if I can give you what you want."

"As if you have any idea what I want," Bucky rasps.

"I know you want out of this place worse than any of us," Gale counters. "I know you want—" And then he stops. He can't say it just to say no to it. "I can't give you what I don't have, myself," he says instead, voice raw as he raises up to meet Bucky's eye. "I wish I could, but I can't."

Bucky listens with that selfsame serious look on his face that he always gets when Gale spills his guts, a furrow in his brow and a purse in his mouth.

"Is that worth anything?" Gale croaks. Humiliatingly, he feels his eyes start to burn, but he looks around quickly to stop any tears from falling.

Bucky's eyebrows go up in the middle, and he comes forward quickly even as Gale turns away from him, trying to hide.

"Yeah, that's worth something, Buck," Bucky says softly, taking Gale's face between his hands, turning him tenderly back. He wipes his thumbs under Gale's sore watering eyes.

Gale shakes his head and pushes forward, resting his face against Bucky's belly, part way under one arm.

Bucky gives a small, strained laugh but lets him do it.

He smells of soap and dirt and sweat, his t-shirt still damp and muddy, but somehow it doesn't put Gale off, and he presses closer, impulsively taking a fold of fabric between his lips and sucking on it like a little kid, salty and sour and bitter just like he remembers.

One of Bucky's hands cradles his head close, the other drifting down to rub at his shoulder.

"Sorry," Gale mumbles, mouth full of t-shirt, shaking and quaking in Bucky's hold, fists clenching in his open uniform shirt so hard it hurts.

Bucky is silent for a moment before he says, sounding unsure, "Hey,

it's okay, Buck. I'm sorry, too."

"We're gonna get through this," Gale grunts out against Bucky's belly. "Don't you stop believing that."

It's silent for so long.

And then finally Bucky hums, considering, stroking his hand through Gale's hair. "If I tell you not to count on it," he asks, "will you keep trying to convince me for a while?"

Gale's surprised laugh shudders out of his lungs. It's the first friendly joke he's heard Bucky make in God knows how long.

When Gale finally looks up again, he suddenly looks like Bucky from England. It's like double vision. Like Bucky's standing in front of a projector projecting him on top of himself. His eyes are warm and blue and his face looks full and flushed.

"I can do that," Gale says, dry mouthed.

"Then, don't count on it, Buck," Bucky obediently recites, breaking out in a tricky little grin. He visibly tries to school it and fails. "Don't you dare."

With a sickening jolt of desire, Gale aches to stand up and kiss him, but he doesn't. He feels his face crumple into a frown as he leans back down to rest against Bucky's torso again, lower this time, brow on the leather of his belt, nose against the hem of his pocket. If someone comes in, it'll probably take them a moment to realize Gale's not in here sucking Bucky's cock, like he desperately wanted to do a few minutes ago. He tries to care about that.

"What do you need that I can actually give you?" Gale asks him.

Bucky gives a scoff of a laugh, still stroking Gale's hair in the sweltering heat of the block. "Eh, this is a start," he says. "What about you, Buck?"

Gale hesitates, thinking. He pulls Bucky closer, clinging around the small of his back now, pressing his cheek into Bucky's side.

"I need us to be on the same side, John," Gale says after awhile, trying to put all the necessary weight and gravity into it, squeezing in hard with his body to punctuate his point. "Or..."

Bucky asks, “Yeah, or what?”

“Or I’ll die here in a million pieces,” Gale tells him seriously.

Bucky huffs a laugh, and Gale finds himself smiling too, despite the fact that he suspects his own little joke might really be true.

Magically, after that, between Gale being lowered to begging and the land invasion of Western Europe, Bucky remembers how to be a solution, rather than a problem.

Always changeable, he changes again, while Gale stays just exactly the same.

Bucky keeps his pillow by the window. He stops trying to touch Gale when no one can see him. He also stops being a bastard about every bastardly thing he can think of. He helps again. He talks. He’s being Gale’s friend.

It’s not like Gale thought it would be. The knot of grief in his stomach never loosens somehow. He doesn’t know what he expected.

When it’s winter again, the Krauts decide to move them.

On the way, they all sleep curled up like puppies for warmth. Bucky comes close but not too close.

Gale imagines a bed to get himself to sleep. He luxuriates in trying to smell the laundry soap, to hear the summer crickets in the farm fields, to feel the rasp of sheets and the give of pillows. What a wondrous thought, to be too warm, to need to kick the blanket to the bottom of the bed. It might feel sticky. It might feel soft.

It’s easy then, for Bucky, with his ponderous head on Gale’s shoulder in the real world, to show up there too, in this imagined life.

Bucky always sleeps on his belly. He might bend one thick leg to rest it up over top of Gale’s. His soft snores might vibrate through his back if Gale laid a hand there. Bucky might put his mouth against Gale’s

bare shoulder, and purse it slightly to let him know he loves him, even half asleep.

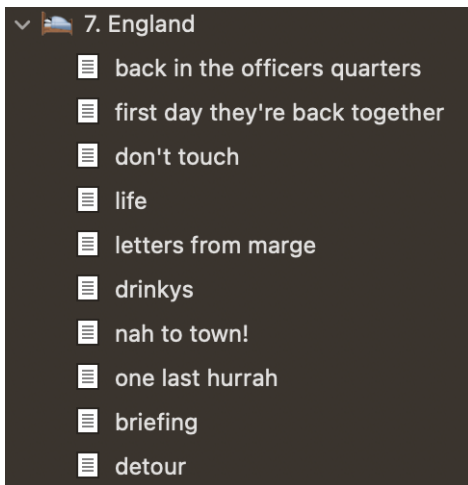
In real life, he only comes close enough anymore to give Gale what he actually needs: his body heat, a shared blanket, an encouraging murmur, and then, eventually— freedom.

Chapter End Notes

again, thank you all soooooo much for your comments and thoughts! they are so helpful in determining tone and next steps and in motivating me with their kindness and intelligence!

again, my tumblr is steeseman!

and here's ur preview >:)



England

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gale and Bucky end up back together in the Officer's Quarters at Thorpe Abbots again, but before that, Gale sleeps alone in the same room where everything started. No, not alone. Just together with people who aren't Bucky.

The metal beds lie in neat rows under the corrugated arch of the ceiling, like a hospital wing. The windows pour in cloudy, grey light. They don't need to shutter everything at night anymore since there isn't any Luftwaffe left to do bombardment raids.

Gale looks down at his same neat bunk, his same side table, his same foot locker with its same lovely photo of Marge Spencer, its same stack of poetry books and science fiction novels, its same lucky deuce from the pocket of one John C. Egan. His wallet is even still there, with its same raggedy old disintegrating letter folded up inside.

The building is just the same but all the people in it have changed, save for Rosenthal, who talks and moans and cries in his sleep now, and Crosby, who's so hopped up on pills he barely ever touches his pillow anymore.

Still, even the noise of the men tossing and groaning sounds silent without Bucky's particular soft snores pulsing in the dark air.

Gale doesn't sleep much. He drifts.

He thinks of Bucky, feral with an instinctual, animal desperation to escape right up until the moment he realized Gale was willing to make a run for it, too. He thinks of the gunshots he heard while he ran.

Amidst the surreality of it all, he goes back to work.

He gets ready for each mission like he used to. He fixes his hair and straps on his uniform, although it doesn't fit him quite like before.

The other pilots and crewmen look at him with pity, apprehension, and admiration. They see a walking corpse, someone who ought to be dead, a strange traveler from another country, scars and bones and ghosts. They admire him in the way you admire the oldest pig on the farm, having somehow forestalled his ticket to the slaughterhouse.

Rosie and Croz tell Gale that Bucky knew he was alive, that he almost fought the orderly who tried to take Gale's footlocker away to be shipped back to the States. Yet, Gale knows that can't be true, because Bucky told *him*, raw voiced and wrapped in his arms, that he was sure Gale was dead.

On the other hand, Gale is sure that Bucky isn't.

He saw a white horse limping through the German countryside, bloodied and bridled but still unbroken, and he just knew.

Bucky's alive. Gale can feel it this time.

And then Bucky's tricky little voice crackles through Gale's headphones, and it's like oxygen rushes back into the cockpit all at once.

They shake hands when they get near enough to touch, standing on the tarmac in an ephemeral vision of their past, surrounded by friends and well-wishers and grinning at one another, eager and agog.

It was the longest they'd been apart since 1941, but they've found their way back yet again, inescapable gravitational force, and they're winning the war, and it's springtime, nearly summer, like it was when they first arrived here.

Bucky looks a little scruffy, maybe a little worse for wear, but overall he's clean and healthy and uninjured. He has a mischievous smile on his face, proud of himself, looking at Gale like, *Play with me!* like he hasn't looked in a long time. He looks like Bucky. Gale can't see anything else for a while.

“I didn’t think you were dead,” Gale is sure to tell him, redirecting his gaze out to wander over the landing strip, his heart bursting endlessly with sparklers and sunrays. “I knew you’d make it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky says, bashfully itching his nose.

Gale sneaks a quick peak at him. “Guess I thought you’d be back a little earlier,” he adds. He tries to sell it, not smile in the middle, even when Bucky looks at him in confusion. “Patton’s army was right there.”

Bucky grabs him in a headlock, and Gale does smile, then.

“You little shit,” Bucky says joyfully. “I missed *you* like a stone in my shoe! I missed you like a fly in my coffee! I missed you like a hole in my head!”

Gale feels himself staying close, luxuriating in the habit of it, the familiar inertia. It’s been so long. His body feels violently good against Bucky’s body.

But Bucky shoves him away when he’s done roughhousing, no lingering.

In fact, that headlock is the closest they get.

Bucky’s given up the ghost, it seems. He doesn’t suggest a card game. He doesn’t try to kiss Gale hello, like he’d done in Germany. He doesn’t even try to touch him.

And Gale doesn’t touch Bucky, either. Gale doesn’t touch him. Gale doesn’t touch him. He doesn’t do it. He doesn’t ask him to play cards or stop by the equipment shed more than necessary. He doesn’t linger. He doesn’t look too long. He’s better than that. He’s not going to do it. He doesn’t touch Bucky. He doesn’t.

They handle each other very carefully, all of a sudden.

Even Bucky’s jacking off is finally polite.

Marge has been sick with worry over him, which Gale supposes she should be. He gets strangely irritated reading her letters, as if it's unreasonable for her to be beside herself, and then he feels guilty, which he should.

She starts out each correspondence for a long time with, *I pray this letter reaches you, Gale*. And then a while after he's finally been able to write a response, she switches to overjoyed celebration. He's still alive and they're winning the war. He's still alive and they'll be together soon. He's still alive and this is almost over. *HUGS AND KISSES!*
MARGE!

The night the Germans surrender, they drink.

They start out the night at the Officer's Club, as all the people of the world scream and carouse in jubilant relief around them.

Gale's stomach drops in dirty anticipation when Bucky tilts his head toward the door, but Bucky just leads him to the control tower to watch the fireworks, taking swills from his flask and eventually offering it to Gale.

The last time Gale drank, it was with a group of boys at his first high school, beside a lake in South Dakota. He'd gone white knuckled around his beer bottle, staring across the circle at a boy named Nick, who had proper arm hair and stubble and pubes already, and vowed never to drink again.

But Gale takes the flask.

Everything is almost over. What's the point of denying oneself, he thinks, under circumstances like these?

"You could go back to the party, John," he says after a while. "I won't mind."

Bucky smiles at him, eyebrows raised. "Well, thanks for the permission, Buck. I'll take comfort in that when all the replacements I've never met before are trying to recruit me into their victory orgy."

"Oh, can it," Gale says with a snort. "They're just getting in one last hurrah." He says it holding up the flask as if to say, See?

“Last chance to get in all the naughty stuff,” Bucky agrees, turning out to the glowing runway. He clears his throat. “Before we head back to our wives and moms.” He takes the flask for a quick swig and then passes it back to Gale right away. “Nah, too loud in there, anyways,” he says. “I’m just dandy right here.”

Gale feels dizzy, but not bad, so he laughs, hanging his head back, and Bucky sidelongs over at him with a contemplative, heavy gaze. It’s funny how handsome he is, after everything, after a hundred lifetimes together and not together. It’s funny that he wants to spend the best night in the world out here talking with Gale instead of singing and dancing inside with everyone else who would sing and dance with him. Everything’s so funny.

Gale lifts the flask from which he definitely shouldn’t have partaken again and says, “To one last hurrah.”

“One last hurrah, huh?” Bucky echoes, swallowing with visible difficulty. And then, his eyes dark, leaning back in his chair, “Buck, do not look at me like that.”

Actually, nothing’s funny. Everything is absolutely life-or-death bail-out deadly serious. Bucky’s eyes are full of orange and green flare lights, sparkling like gemstones. His nose is straight and striking and can feel like a sweet little caress against Gale’s cheek if he gets close enough. His mustache has a few hairs out of place, just above his upper lip. He looks like maybe he’d do whatever Gale wanted, and Gale already knows what he wants to ask for.

“How am I looking at you?” Gale asks him hoarsely.

That’s all it takes.

Bucky slams his hands down on the tower railing and stands up. “Alright, fine. You want one last hurrah, Buck? You wanna do something crazy? Let’s go.”

Bucky starts them walking toward the old equipment shed, but Gale puts a hand on his arm and shakes his head, and his brain spins with it unpleasantly.

“Take me into town,” he says, smiling for some reason, leaning into

Bucky's shoulder. Christ, he's drunk.

Bucky looks back at him with his face pinched.

"I know a spot," Gale says.

By the time they actually get there, Gale's starting to feel distressingly sober, but that's what pubs are *for*, he remembers!

Bucky pushes on Gale's lower back to guide him through the entrance, and then he goes and does exactly what Gale told him to do, and efficiently chats up the first girl he lays eyes on. They disappear up the stairs to the attached inn within twenty minutes, though not without depositing the spare key in Gale's pocket.

Gale debates on how long to wait to follow, nursing a whiskey that the familiar bartender had delighted in finally serving him. Bucky's supposed to be sending the girl back down but the longer she takes to show, the itchier Gale gets.

In the end, he runs out of patience and passes her by on the stairs as she descends with her pincurls falling and her makeup smudged. She doesn't bother making eye contact with him, seeming dazed as she stumbles back to the bar.

Gale's stomach roils like a screaming tea kettle, and he jogs up the last few steps, checking down the hall for anyone watching before he ducks into the room.

Bucky's standing at the window, drawing the dark curtains.

His mouth drops open when he sees Gale walk in, like he's surprised by it somehow.

The inn room is only big enough for a bed dressed in plain white linens, dimly lit with covered glass sconces on the wall, everything old and painted a thousand times. Management must know what people are keen to use their rooms for tonight, because on the tiny side table, there's a veritable heap of rubbers and that H-R ointment the Brits like to use.

Gale's heart slams like a porch door in a storm.

Bucky looks like himself, as always, which is good enough, but it's continually stunning to see him cleaned up in a fresh uniform, mustache trimmed, hair cut to regulation and slickly styled, if unraveling slightly by this time of night. He's loosened his tie and undone his first few buttons— or maybe that woman did it. His expression falls even and serious as he crosses the room to get to Gale, who deadbolts the door behind him and throws his jacket to the side.

Bucky grabs him by the face to kiss him.

Gale gets Bucky by the waist.

Their mouths meet in a hard, plush, wildfire collision. For a moment, Gale feels his teeth against the inside of his mouth, and then Bucky adjusts him and licks his way in sweetly and persistently.

He makes a noise Gale's never heard from him before, like a sob, and he pulls closer, wrapping Gale up with arms around his shoulders. They hold each other tighter than ever.

It's been so long.

It's been so goddamn long.

It feels like the first swim of the summer, the first Red Cross parcel in months, the first drink after a run.

Eventually Bucky pulls away to look at Gale up against the door, face open as he pushes his fingers in a shivering trail from Gale's hairline to the nape of his neck, holding his cheek in one rough hand, more or less the same way he'd touched that English gal earlier.

Gale feels another head-swirling wave of drunken bitterness pass through him, and he suddenly asks, "Did you fuck her?" He doesn't usually talk about women that way. He doesn't know what's gotten into him.

Bucky freezes against him and then laughs out, "Christ, no, Buck, I didn't sleep with the girl you *asked* me to bring up here."

Unreasonably pleased, Gale feels himself smiling, warm little tummy, tingly little toes. Just what kind of whiskey do they serve at this place?

"Good," he says as he surges up to kiss Bucky again. Jesus, it feels good to touch him. Every inch of John Egan feels so impossibly good

against him, solid and huge and soft and hot.

He didn't fuck the bar girl like he fucked the kriegie doctor, and no matter who he fucks, they're not going to have him like Gale has him, open mouthed and desperate for it, groaning like a starving animal just because Gale is willing to slip him some tongue. Bucky's never written a girl a letter in his life, but he sent one to Gale when they were only apart for a week.

"Well, that's a little rich," Bucky says roughly, the next time they part, "coming from you."

Gale can't even respond to it, he's so worked up. He gropes at Bucky's waist and hips and chest as he kisses him, then brings one hand up to touch his mouth, feeling the puffs of labored breath against his fingertips.

It's been so long. It's never been like this. It's never going to *be* like this. Never when anyone touches Gale, never when he touches himself, will it ever feel anything like this, lightning, sparklers, flash pan heat, explosions.

Gale frowns hard, feeling his chin stick out in a stubborn push against the feeling rising in his chest as he presses in on Bucky's lovely lip.

"Open up," he says.

Bucky listens right away, sharp jaw dropping, letting Gale stick his thumb in his mouth. He sucks like it's his job, like always, as Gale shoves it in deeper, pushing down his tongue, all the way to the joint of his thumb, like he can push the heel of his palm into Bucky's mouth too.

Gale Cleven, you goddamn fool, Gale thinks clearly.

And then Bucky bites down.

Gale gives a shout and recoils, shaking out his wet hand. "Christ, Bucky!" he says as Bucky laughs and backs away to sit on the bed, long legs buckling under him.

There are pinkening marks on Gale's hand in the shape of his incisors.

From the bed, sort of sideways, Bucky shrugs at him, impudent as ever. "Well?" he asks.

Gale straightens up from the door a little more, pushing himself with a still smarting palm. "Well, what? Gonna bite me again?" he asks, not sure what he wants the answer to be.

Bucky grins, all teeth. "Oh, I think I got it out of my system," he says. "I'll be a perfect gentleman. Promise."

"There are no gentlemen in the Hundredth," Gale counters, reaching down to touch himself over his pants. He's so hard. He can't think.

"Least of all Buck Clevon," Bucky agrees, voice going reedy as he watches Gale's hand move. "Get over here, would you?"

Gale does, putting one knee on the bed and resting his forearms on Bucky's shoulders. Even just that feels so good.

Bucky runs his hands softly up the back of Gale's legs, and it makes him shudder and shiver, hunching in.

"What do you want, Buck?" Bucky asks, frowning up at him.

Gale knew what he wanted to ask for before they ever got here, before he accepted his first sip, before he got out of the goddamn stalag. "I want you to show me how you would've done it," he rumbles out, low, flicking his eyes at the door the bar gal left through. "With that girl."

Bucky squints at him with an expression adjacent to anger. He looks at Gale like he wants to hurt him.

"If I'd—" he says, and then takes a quavering breath. "That's what you want?" His voice gives a slight squeak.

Gale nods, stepping back off the bed.

"Well, then let's get you out of that dress, dollface," Bucky says, flat.

Gale's guts squirm, and he warningly replies, "Hey, now."

But Bucky just looks up at him, insolent, face smooth but eyes burning as he takes a forceful hold of Gale's belt, so rough that Gale takes a step forward to keep his balance, feeling his pulse pound in his dick.

"You asked me to show you," Bucky says, his voice descending into its strung-out bottom register. "So let me show you."

Gale reaches out to hold Bucky's head between his hands, curly hair

between his fingers.

He feels so warm and soft and human. It's been so long.

Bucky unbuckles Gale's belt.

It's been so long. For a time, the feeling of John Egan opening his pants was as familiar as eggs for breakfast. Now, it's a revelation again. His knuckles bump Gale's lower abdomen, and just that makes Gale want to cry out. Everything burns so bad.

"John," he rasps as Bucky untucks his shirt from his open slacks and starts unbuttoning it.

Bucky keeps their eyes locked like he's angry, seething with barely contained violence under a placid surface, and then he bursts to his feet and practically rips off Gale's shirt and singlet, diving down to mouth across his chest with hard insistent hands on his back pressing him into it.

Gale does cry out, then, a little, as Bucky kisses open mouthed over his nipple, down his rib cage, across his belly, all the while turning Gale around and pushing him down onto the bed.

He grabs at Gale's waistband and underwear and pulls both off at once, taking his socks with them.

What he doesn't do, Gale notes with dissatisfaction, is make any move at all to undress himself.

Still in his rumpled green dress uniform, Bucky discards Gale's clothing over the side of the bed and then just stares for a long moment, standing on his knees on the mattress between Gale's ankles, and Gale almost wants to hide under the darkness of his gaze.

"I think I'm dreaming," Bucky says, of all things, his eyes trailing down Gale's chest and groin and legs, and then back up to his face.

Gale scoffs shakily. "Want me to pinch you?"

Bucky doesn't answer, just sinks down to taste Gale's cock, descending onto it like a man starving, groaning with his eyes squeezed shut.

Gale jerks in his mouth and yanks him off by the hair, which just has Bucky groaning more. "Wait— John—" Gale says with difficulty. "Get up here," and Bucky finally allows himself to be pulled off, mouth

slack and wet under his mustache, and gives in to kiss Gale again, hands roaming his skin, grabby.

Gale tugs at Bucky's shirt then, and says, "Take this off," the next time their mouths part. His front feels raw already from rubbing up against the fabric, desperate for the smooth touch of another naked body.

Bucky pulls up to look at him, eyes glinting flinty.

"That's hilarious," he says with feeling, and he doesn't listen.

Instead he comes down to kiss Gale again, his mouth hot and wet and consuming, his uniform pants touching down abrasively against Gale's leaking cock, staining white with it in stuttering lines of movement, his wide pelvis pushing Gale's bare legs unrelentingly apart.

And then he reaches one hand down between them to push his finger hard against Gale's asshole without warning, and Gale convulses like Bucky stuck him with a live wire, shaking out a groaning noise from his nose as Bucky massages there, murmuring, "Breathe."

Gale obeys. He takes in a low, rattling gasp of breath, staring up starry eyed. Because Bucky told him to.

Bucky drops his forehead against Gale's, eyes falling shut as he continues rubbing hard at Gale's hole, like he's going to push his way in through sheer force of will, like Gale used to do in the stalag.

"I'm gonna make it so good, Buck," Bucky growls out. It sounds like a threat. "I'm gonna fuck your goddamn brains out."

Gale gulps another breath, nodding against Bucky's forehead, both hands in his hair holding him close. Maybe if Gale breathes deep enough he can just take it, somehow. He should probably say no to something like that, but he doesn't want to say no. He's run completely out of no's. Bucky could take a brutal biting mouthful out of his jugular and Gale would find a way to gurgles yes, yes, yes.

"You done this before?" he thinks to ask, voice like an engine that won't turn over.

Bucky pushes up and reaches for the tube of H-R Jelly on the bedstand, tongue poking out to lick his bottom lip. "The other way around, sure," he says easily, squeezing out the ointment onto his fingers.

His hair is all pushed out of place, sticking out in curly tufts, frustratingly attractive in his sweaty clothes.

Gale burns. There's dark black gasoline smoke thundering through his veins. He's a shriveled, shrunken pit of coals. He's smaller and more vulnerable than anything on Earth.

He's operating at 12,000 feet with no mask.

Everything mixes together.

He thinks about Marge. He tries to picture her in his mind's eye, but her face is blank.

And then everything is blank as Bucky sticks a slippery finger inside, and the feeling of it is so overwhelming and sensitive and tight that Gale's brain takes a long pause.

Bucky's fingers are big. Everything about him is hot and big, and he's still in his uniform, pressing on Gale's naked body like a blistering brand.

"Jesus," Gale rasps, gulping for air, grabbing at Bucky's arms, scrambling on the sheets, trying to move, though he doesn't know where he's trying to move to.

Bucky fucks him on that thick finger a few times, in and out, and leans down to kiss him hard again, like he can't stop doing it after so long without.

It's a far cry from Gale's fumbling attempts in the stalag, undone just by the dirty idea of what he was attempting.

Bucky pushes against Gale's insides toward his dick and each movement pulses a hot shiver through Gale's groin, up through his cock.

Gale tries to spread his legs more, stretching, and then he tries closing them with Bucky still between. He's touching Bucky's hair compulsively, pushing it back and back and back as he lets out a small noise into their kiss.

"Alright, why don't you show me how you like it, sweetheart?" Bucky asks eventually, pulling back. His hand stops moving, still inside.

"You know how I like it, Bucky," Gale mutters.

Bucky sits back completely then, letting Gale yank at his hair impotently to stop him from going. "Not like this, I don't," he insists, a hint of a smile emerging. "Show me."

Gale takes a shuddering breath, bizarrely not wanting to admit he doesn't really have any idea what he likes *like this*. Just that he likes it. So he holds his hand out for the lube, and Bucky obligingly squeezes out a bit onto Gale's fingers.

He waits for Bucky to pull out, but he doesn't, watching Gale with that same blank look he keeps throwing up. "Go ahead," he says, raising his eyebrows.

So Gale feels down past his twitching dick and his tight balls for his hole, sliding two fingers down around either side of Bucky's for a moment, just to feel it inside, to feel himself around Bucky's hand, and then he scrapes his middle fingernail along the skin of Bucky's finger as he pushes into himself, chest heaving at the renewed pressure.

His dick emits a hot spurt of clear fluid.

With his other hand, Gale grabs onto Bucky's bicep, trying to catch eyes with him like he might look back in comfort, but Bucky's gaze just stays locked on their hands between Gale's legs, his pink tongue flicking out over his bottom lip.

Gale experimentally does what Bucky did, hooking his finger and pressing up in repeating motions, and the frustratingly hot, vague, tight sensation makes a sound rumble up out of him. He hitches one foot up the bed so he can move, and Bucky automatically puts his free hand on Gale's shin to hold it in place.

Gale just wants. He's burning alive. He wants Bucky's cock. He wants Bucky's attention. He wants his attention like he's never wanted the attention of any other person in the history of the universe. He never wants Bucky to fuck anyone else for the rest of his life.

He shoves in another finger to speed things along, and then Bucky starts moving again too which has Gale moaning pathetically before he can stop himself, and finally, some of Bucky's cold resolve seems to fall away, and his face softens as he turns to kiss the inside of Gale's knee. "Christ, you're prettier than a picture," he murmurs there, as Gale pants, restless fingers still moving.

With his thumb, Bucky starts rubbing circles on Gale's taint, just above his hole where their fingers are working, and he suddenly feels

like he's going to come before what he asked for has even happened.

"John, wait, don't," Gale begs.

Bucky goes still, expression shuttering again, and it makes Gale feel so desperate for some reason.

He shakes his head. "I can't— Just, can you get on with—"

"Turn over," Bucky tells him, looking so troubled all of a sudden.

And Gale just obeys, yanking his fingers out. Bucky's goes with them, and Gale's ass aches and convulses as he turns over in a hurry, burying his face in his forearms crossed over the pillow.

He hears Bucky unzipping his pants finally, a bit of shuffling, and then he feels Bucky's cock slap against his hole and slide down, slick with lube and hot with blood. He jabs it hard along Gale's taint again, and it sends a hot jolt down his dick, then slides it back up.

One of his hands grips Gale's hip and the thumb digs into one asscheek, pulling it to the side, and Gale can feel his hole open slightly.

"Tell me you want it," Bucky says, hoarse.

And Gale almost disappears in on himself like a dying star, squeezing his eyes shut, pushing his forehead against his arm. But— "I want it," he croaks.

So Bucky gives it to him.

Gale can feel the slippery, blunt head pressing on him, then stinging as the wide tip stretches and spreads inexorably, relief as it pops in, and then—

Just like that, Gale Cleven is a proper sodomite. He might feel like there's no coming back from it if he hadn't already felt that way from the very start, the moment he told Bucky to pull his blanket down. The moment they met, laughing in the dark.

Gale hears himself make a noise each time he exhales, like he's trying to get out some humiliating little plea without words, but he can't keep quiet.

Bucky pushes in a bit more, and it aches, and then he pulls back, and then in all the more, and Gale groans out loud with it, hitching his

legs up, trying to relieve some of the stretch and pressure. His dick has softened some, but he still feels in some way like he's just about to come.

Bucky holds both of his hips and shoves, what must be all the way in, hot and thick, then a little more.

Gale hangs his head down between his elbows, heaving in breaths one after the other, sounding like a drowning victim as Bucky starts really fucking him, steady now, so fucking deep, so god damn big.

The stretch is unbelievable, still pinching somewhat at his rim, but it's also warm and full and piercingly hot up into his guts. It feels like Gale is going to piss for some reason, or, even stranger, he feels like he's already pissing himself, though he can plainly see that he isn't. He's just leaking more than he ever has in his life. It's like he comes a bit every time Bucky drives down inside.

He gets one hand down to touch his own cock, hissing at the feeling of it, pulling on himself, half-soft and drooling, wet like a girl.

"John, *John*," he begs, and he feels Bucky lean down over him, landing on his forearms on either side of Gale's, buttons and belt digging into his back. His dick sinks in deeper, if that's even possible, in Gale's fucking throat now— as he gets close, the warm, heavy mass of him weighing rhythmically down on Gale's body.

After a few more thrusts in, Bucky whimpers into the back of his head, "That good for you, Buck? S'that okay?"

Gale is literally shaking with it, trembling and wavering in his thighs and belly and bicep and shoulder where they flex to hold him up.

If they'd done this before Bremen, he thinks deliriously, he might've never asked Marge to marry him at all. It might have ruined his whole life.

"It's good," is what Gale manages to actually say, down deep from the bottom of his register, slurring words like he's drunker than he is. "It's so—" Bucky pushes in hard and Gale cuts off. He whispers— He can barely get it out, overwrought, "It's good, John. Jesus."

Bucky whimpers again, almost whines, like he can't stand to hear it.

"Fuck, I wanna do this forever," he says, his words faltering at each movement of his body, in, in, in. "Just wanna— keep you in bed,

ankles over your head, every single day and every single night until kingdom fucking come, Gale Cleven. Fuck, *fuck*.”

The image washes Gale over in chills and sparks and heartache, and he groans into the pillow, shoving his face down, panting like anything. His dick gives a hot, trembling gush like a faucet—he can't do anything but squeeze it slightly— and his hips start jerking without him telling them to.

“Christ, I think I’m coming,” he gets out through grinding teeth. Maybe that’s not right. Maybe he already came. His body tries to hump the air as waves of heat expand through him, each one starting before the last one ends and pushing out another euphoric dribble of spend. The motion of his hips pulls him a ways off of Bucky’s dick and then Bucky pulls him back onto it. Maybe this is just aftershocks. Maybe he’s never going to stop coming and Bucky’s really going to keep him here until the end of time, face down in this bed with his ass open and full of cock. “I’m— I—” His voice breaks pathetically.

Bucky moans and fucks him through a couple more spasms before he seems to belatedly process what Gale said and shudders to a stop, sitting up, off of Gale’s back. “Buck?” he asks roughly. “You okay?”

Gale can’t stop squirming, clenching down on Bucky’s dick and getting a little grunt out of him, letting out an embarrassing noise when another wave of pleasure crests through. “This never happened,” he groans, “when you did it?”

“I wasn’t even sure I *liked* it when I did it,” Bucky mutters, rubbing Gale’s back in a way that might be comforting if every nerve ending in his body wasn’t standing at attention and burning like a brushfire.

Gale twitches restlessly under his ministrations, and Bucky says, “Alright, c’mere,” as he gently presses down on the rim of Gale’s ass to pull out.

Gale convulses with it, bawling, “*Fuck. Jesus*,” heaving for air as Bucky turns him onto his back again.

Not wasting a moment, Bucky kneels up over Gale’s waist, then, jacking off furiously, groaning in his chest, biting his lip and then pulling it free while Gale boggles up at him, mindless, at Bucky’s lovely face and his messy curly dark hair, the bottom of his chin with a smattering of whiskers. His cock is as big as Gale remembers, and he just had the whole thing inside his body, all the way in, balls against his ass.

Bucky, in turn, looks down at Gale miserably, mouth tight over a stubborn chin, and then comes right on his face without so much as a warning.

It's hot and slick, and it smells overwhelmingly metallic this close to his nose.

Gale blinks slowly.

There's come even in his eyelashes.

He wouldn't let Marge treat him like this, he thinks, but Bucky isn't Marge.

Gale swipes a hand down his face, inadvertently smearing some of the spend into his mouth, the rest down his chin.

Bucky huffs audibly through his breathing and gets up off of Gale in a hurry, turning toward the hotel room wall, resting one hand against it.

"Sorry," he croaks, face turned down. "I shouldn't have done that."

"It's alright," Gale says slowly, wiping at his face again and sitting up gingerly, feeling his heartbeat pound in his twitching hole. "Nothing to be sorry for."

Bucky looks up at him then, and his face contorts. "This can't happen again, Buck," he says.

And although Gale obviously agrees, it hurts like some kind of festering, meat-grinding puncture wound to hear Bucky say it.

He gets up before he knows what he's doing, naked as the day he was born, disheveled and fucked, covered in sweat and semen.

Bucky leans his head back and tilts it, surly as Gale approaches.

Gale tries to kiss him one more time, but Bucky steps away, shaking his head, reaching down to zip up his slacks. His face is bathed in shadow. His fingers tremble on the zipper of his fly.

The image of it strikes through Gale like a bullet. Remorse swallows him up.

"Bucky," he says. "I—"

"Think you can drive back to base yourself, Buck?" Bucky asks. "I'm

gonna go hitch a ride.”

And then he summarily grabs his jacket and disappears.

It doesn't happen again.

In fact, Gale doesn't see much of Bucky at all in the days that follow, as they prepare the first round of forts to fly back home.

From a distance, Gale sometimes catches a glimpse of him driving somewhere or chatting with someone, or when he gets in bed at night.

But Bucky somehow never materializes at Gale's side like he used to. Even when Gale looks for him, he's hard to find.

His new bunk isn't even next to Gale's. It's down the row by the door, and neither of them have bothered to do anything about it, like they might've before.

Gale is just alone in the dark with his bruised, bitten hand and his sore hole under his uniform and his own apocalyptic thoughts.

He doesn't see Bucky up close again until they group up for their very last Thorpe Abbotts mission briefing.

Bucky arrives a minute after everyone else and smiles at Gale faintly, strained, as he settles down close in his seat at the front, to the left of the center aisle, with his arms crossed.

“Mornin', sunshine,” he says out of the side of his mouth.

Visions on top of visions. He looks like himself and not like himself. He shaved messily, and his shirt is crinkled, but he smells fresh and clean and welcome. He has his cap on over his hair and the jacket he stole from Jack on over his flight suit.

Gale pauses, completely struck by the sight of him. He'd saved Bucky's seat, of course, but he hadn't been sure if Bucky would actually sit in it.

“Morning, Major,” he replies, delayed.

“Got myself assigned to your fort for the flight back,” Bucky stage-whispers, the preposterously loud version of it he always does, like nothing of note has happened between them in the past few days— in the past few years.

Gale huffs a chuckle of disbelief, and Bucky looks at him for a moment, a little twitchy, before he winks, and then the briefing starts and they have to shut up.

At first everything is normal. As normal as it ever was.

Bucky's smiley and chatty all the way to Greenland. While they refuel, he has a drink at the base bar and finally apologizes to the bartender. He looks warm and funny and charming leaning over the counter, his elbows bent in the brown old beaten up leather jacket.

But then as they take off for their final leg from Greenland to Bradley, he gets quiet.

Always a bad sign.

He keeps glancing at Gale like he thinks Gale said something he didn't hear, but Gale hasn't spoken once.

He's just waiting, like a man in line at the gallows.

Bucky will say it if he wants to say it. He always does, eventually.

This time it takes awhile.

When he finally speaks it's to ask about the fuel tanks, which have a couple hours left in them, and then he smiles over his oxygen mask, little sparkling eyes like Gale hasn't seen in months.

Bucky clicks the intercom over to the crew line and asks, “Hey, Croz, think you can give me the heading for a little detour?”

Crosby's crackling laughter comes across the radio a minute later, and Gale and Bucky exchange glances, gleeful on Bucky's part and concerned on Gale's.

Bucky flies them out toward upstate New York, about an hour and a half off their assigned flightpath, grinning all the way.

“What are they gonna do, court martial us?” he asks over the intercom, and receives various cackles and whoops in response.

Then he clicks their intercom dial back to the co-pilot channel— just Gale and Bucky. He clicks it to the crew again, and then back to make extra sure, squinting at the labels. “Anyone copy?” he tests, low.

No one answers, of course, except for Gale, who automatically says, “I copy.”

Bucky steals a quick glance at him and then looks back out the windscreen. “Something I wanted to say to you,” he mutters, clearing his throat, which comes through the mic overloud.

For one very clear, humiliating moment, Gale is sure Bucky’s going to confess everything.

He’s going to say that this thing between them isn’t something he can live without, that he won’t be able to attend Gale’s wedding and not object, that he sees Gale the way no one else sees him.

He’s going to say, ‘I love you, Buck Cleven; I’ve always loved you,’ or some such, and Gale’s going to let him down easy even as bile rises in his throat. Gale can do it! It’s what he’s here for.

However—

Instead, Bucky says to him, “Back in Texas, before the war, I always, uh— I always knew you were sweet on me.”

Gale freezes in his seat.

He forgot, somehow. Bucky knows how to read upside down.

“What?” Gale rasps, probably not even audible over the comms.

“You were never interested in girls,” Bucky says, glancing over at him quickly, and then away again, “and you always wanted to be with me, even though you never wanted to do what I was doing.”

Gale’s head spins so bad as he listens that he almost worries about hypoxia. Was he? Did he? It’s not how Gale remembers it, but Bucky wouldn’t lie.

“You’d get all sour when I went on dates, and then you started wanting to go along for those, too.”

Gale didn’t ask. He can’t have asked. It feels like three lifetimes ago now, but he’s sure he wouldn’t have asked to go with Bucky on—Christ— his *dates with girls*. Bucky must have just known, like he knows a lot of things. Just like Gale has been guessing what Bucky might want, Bucky’s been guessing about what Gale wants, too.

“You would—” Bucky pauses, and Gale finds himself on the edge of his seat. “You’d turn all pink, when I winked at you, or when I said something a little dirty, and you’d look at me like—” He shakes his head and finally makes eye contact with Gale across the cockpit. “—I don’t know,” he says, brows furrowing as he searches Gale’s face. “Just the way you look at me sometimes,” he says.

Gale doesn’t know how he looks at Bucky. Gale has no earthly idea. But he feels thin and transparent in the face of the way Bucky looks back at him, now.

“And I don’t mean this as an insult,” Bucky says next, turning back to the sky, “but I never, ever thought you’d find yourself a girl to marry in a hundred years. I just did not see it coming. You had me blind sided with that one, Buck. Bowled over.”

Gale feels insulted anyways. “Okay, I got it,” he mutters.

“Wishful thinking, I guess,” Bucky adds with a rough laugh. “Oh, hey, there they are.”

He’s taken them for a pleasure cruise over Niagara Falls, and he switches their mics back over to the crew line as he tilts the plane into a turn for a better view. “Feast your eyes, gentlemen, and welcome home! One of the seven wonders of the world!”

That is not correct, but Gale doesn’t say anything, looking down at the thunderous white cloud surrounded by teal and brown and seething bubbles. It’s supposed to be an imposing sight, but from here, the Falls look quaint and harmless. Tiny.

After listening to the men ooh and aah and hoot and holler for a while, Gale switches their comms back to the co-pilot channel.

“So why didn’t you ever say anything?” he asks, like there was no intermission at all. “You—” He makes a vague gesture that certainly doesn’t approximate what he means— ‘You were already queer. You

had had sex with men, even though I didn't know it then. You knew I loved you and you were queer the whole time and you didn't say anything, and everything might be different now if you had.'

"Back in Texas?" Bucky laughs. "What would you have done if I'd said something, Buck?"

Run for the hills, probably.

Gale gives a vague grunt, half a chuckle of acknowledgement. His chest hurts with it.

Bucky tilts his head. "Yeah, I know you, Gale Cleven," he says softly.

Gale turns back to the yoke, numb, sitting suspended in the air next to his co-pilot who knows they're in love just like Gale knows they're in love. But Gale is still going to keep everything in order in spite of this. It's what he's good at. It's what he's here for. It's what he's been doing his entire goddamn life, so he's going to do it.

"I guess I just don't know where Marge fits into it," Bucky says. "You want to marry her? You *want* to do that?"

Gale desperately humors him, imagining himself in his uniform standing across from Marge in her white dress, the smiles on their faces, the styles of their hair, the murmurs of their guests, yellow sunlight through the church windows, their future spreading out resplendent ahead of them, and he has to say, voice full of air, "I do, John."

"You love her?"

Gale can say yes to that easily, too. It's just true. Sure, he loves Marge. He's always loved Marge.

"Of course I do," he says.

Bucky makes a strange, sudden noise. He nods. He looks out at the sky and itches his ear under his headphone. "Well, then that settles it," he says.

"Guess it does," Gale murmurs.

And Bucky has Crosby plot a course for Bradley Air Base, and that's that.

The rest of the way is quiet until they get close enough for the Bradley

control tower to scold them for being so late, and then they prepare to land on American soil for the first time in years.

“Look at us, huh?” Bucky says, a tiny smile in the corner of his funny little mouth as their landing gear approaches the runway for one final descent. “Last two in the air.”

And bang. There’s the ground.

Chapter End Notes

yayyyyyy we are getting into the end game finally!!!

commenters: THANK YOU SO GOD DAMN MUCH! i am the type of writer who outlines everything in advance and then pivots and adjusts based on the ensuing vibes, and soooo many of those vibes come from y’all’s reactions.

if you happen to be moved to leave a comment, i would love to hear your guys’ hopes and dreams and predictions for the final two chapters!! not a guarantee they’ll happen, of course, but it gives me soooo much data and input as i go about wrapping things up in a satisfying way. □

also LMAO I APOLOGIZE FOR THIS PREVIEW IN ADVANCE
PLEASE BEAR WITH ME:

- ▼  8. Wyoming
 - ▮ marge and gale's bedroom
 - ▮ the letters come true
 - ▮ thinky thoughts
 - ▮ letters from gale
 - ▮ denial
 - ▮ mom
 - ▮ letters from bucky
 - ▮ bad backyard time
 - ▮ and so

Wyoming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gale and Marge stay in her brothers' childhood bedroom for the weeks leading up to the wedding.

Well, Marge is supposed to be sleeping in her own room, but she smiles sneakily at him when she's bringing him up to drop off his suitcase. "I'm just down the hall," she murmurs in her lovely low voice, "so I'll see you later."

The walls are adorned in blue and white botanical wallpaper, lined with shelves of adventure books and encyclopedias. Next to the springy marshmallow bed, an ancient wooden baby crib remains in one corner, filled for now with linens and towels but patiently awaiting the next generation of little Spencers.

The wallpaper is interspersed with drawings and photographs and letters, a long history of life, light-haired children running in fields and going to churches.

One picture shows all of the Spencer children lined up in a row— six of them, Margie the youngest and littlest—next to the front stairs at Christmas. She must have been in kindergarten at most, in a festively poofy dress, white stockings on, blond hair up in pigtails with ribbons, making the sourest tiny scowling face imaginable.

"Well, weren't you cute," Gale says when he sees it.

Marge's mouth drops open and she snatches the photo off the wall, going pink. "Don't look at that," she orders, turning to tap her painted fingernail against his chest imperiously. "If you see any more childhood photos of me, you better close those eyes, buckaroo."

Gale has to laugh. "Yes, ma'am," he says, smiling.

Any resentment he'd felt toward her letters had melted away in her actual presence, reminded all at once that she is a person, not a series

of words and a posed studio photograph, the same girl who he's known since childhood, who he has a whole life of funny, fond memories with.

Marge brings her finger up to his nose and gives it a cute little swipe under the tip, following the motion up with a soft, lingering kiss on his mouth.

She leans in with her elbows held tight against her sides, making herself small for him, and he takes hold of her frame easily between his hands.

It feels almost like old times, aside from the fact that the moment Gale saw Marge waiting for him at the train station, swaying nervously back and forth with her hair and makeup and dress all perfect and pastel in the full noon June sunlight, he belatedly realized he'd been unfaithful to her.

Worse than unfaithful. Debaucherous. Unspeakably degenerate, licentious, and filthy.

Somehow, he hadn't thought of it that way at the time. Everything with Bucky was so deviant, so far outside the realm of the reality of the rest of his life, that it hadn't seemed like it could ever touch the delightful and maidenly Marjorie Spencer, waiting for him unpolluted at home in America, but maybe when you spend enough of your life on the wrong side of reality, reality has a way of catching up to you.

The very first night in her parents' house in Wyoming, Marge sneaks into his room in a white floral house coat and a blush pink negligée.

Gale goes dry mouthed. "Hi," he whispers, throat like wasps' nest paper.

She shushes him and hurriedly closes the door, dropping her housecoat on the carpet, her careful set of blond curls glowing in the blue moonlight through the window that casts the valley between her thighs, dark nipples and pubic hair in shadows through the gauzy transparent fabric of her nightgown.

"Hi," she whispers in reply as she pulls back his covers.

They only ever went beyond using their hands or rubbing together through their clothes once, the night before he'd shipped out, parked out in the woods, packed in the back of her car, sweaty and humid.

Gale had asked Marge three times if she was sure, and by the third time she'd laughed and said, "Now, who says you're not a gentleman, Gale Cleven?" never considering for one moment that he was doing anything other than wrestling back his darkest, most animal impulses for her sake.

Now she climbs into his bed like it's nothing, grinning and cringing at the squeak of the bed springs under her hip as she scoots in on her side.

Marge softly holds Gale's face and kisses him, one hand abrasive and tickly with the wrapped condom she's cupping against his cheek.

Gale can do this.

He has one arm bent under his own head, but he puts his free hand into the dip of Marge's waist, feels her ribs, the way her skin moves under the silky negligée, and slides his palm up to cup the soft, sweet handful of her breast.

She makes a quiet noise in response and surges closer before she abruptly stills and lays back on his pillows, gently tugging him to follow until he's over top of her, his knee on the mattress between her thighs.

Marge is completely gorgeous, her face like the moon, tiny freckly nose all scrunched, lips like a bow, hair spreading golden across the linens.

Gale is so inconceivably lucky that a girl like her was willing to wait for him all this time.

They just kiss softly for a long while under the sheets, listening to the cicadas outside.

Marge smells like powder and familiar perfume.

She touches the front of his pajama shirt like she might start to unbutton it.

And then Gale rests his elbow beside her head and has an abrupt vision of Bucky's fist clenching next to his on the pillow in England,

when Gale had been so bleary-eyed and full of cock he hadn't been able to process what he was looking at.

He's up and off of her before he can make any kind of conscious decision at all. His body's reflexive rejection.

He stumbles to the window and turns toward it, pressing his forehead against the warm glass.

He knows with a nauseating jolt that he's been with a man more times than he's ever been with a woman. No contest.

"Gale?" Marge uncertainly calls from his bed.

It had felt, back in Europe, like once he returned to the States it would all be a dream— something that happened to somebody else.

But it all happened to Gale, didn't it?

He really saw his friends being blown guts and brains apart by bombs and bullets, burning alive and shrieking with severing vocal cords, and now he's here in Wyoming wondering what's for breakfast tomorrow. He really stuck his cock into his best friend's mouth on a daily basis for weeks, and now he's here with Marjorie Spencer again. All of this happened on the same planet. All of this happened in this same atmosphere to the same flesh and bones and brain Gale has had since he was born.

"Sorry," he shudders. "Sorry, Marge, I—" He shakes his head, trying to breathe. He can't get anything good to come out. He doesn't know what on Earth he'd even say.

He can hear the soft sounds as Marge climbs out of the bed and steps in behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist, her little nose poking over his shoulder, her breasts against his back through their pajamas.

"No, I'm sorry, sweetheart," she says firmly. "You've been through the wringer and you *just* got home. I just thought you'd want—" She pauses and presses her cheek against the back of his shoulder, squeezing him tighter. "Of course you need some time to adjust. We can wait, alright? It's better that way anyways."

Gale breathes, nodding.

That's right. Marge is a church girl, after all.

Things happen at the time they're supposed to happen. They shouldn't have sex until after the wedding. Of course. That's the order in which things were always supposed to go.

The next evening, Marge's parents throw them an engagement party.

No point in waiting on the wedding preparations with the war in the Pacific still dragging on, when anything and everything could still technically happen.

There's a prayer before the meal time, and Marge's father, Walt, gets choked up saying thank you to the Lord for returning all of his sons to him, gracious enough to count Gale among them, and then there's coffee and date bars and buttered buns with cheese and salami.

Marge holds Gale's hand and tells him names, but it all slips out of his mind between one and the next. Everything is disconnected. It all mixes together. He remembers one of Marge's friends from elementary school, but she hadn't been very nice to him, so he doesn't remind her of it.

"Ooh, what kind of pilot is he?" she asks Marge conspiratorially, like Gale isn't there just next to her.

"Well, Gale here flies *B-70's*," Marge replies cheerily, and Gale doesn't make the correction. "The big ones, you know, with four propellers?"

The girl sighs. "Ugh, I should've gone to Texas, too, Margie," she laments, pouting. "I wish I was adventurous like you are. You always do just what you decide to, no matter what anyone says, and look what it got you!" She gives Gale a winning smile.

Is Marge adventurous? He supposes he never particularly thought of her that way. Sweet, funny, forward, smart, but adventurous?

Maybe the people at this party are looking at Gale and Marge and thinking, *What a handsome, adventurous couple. How lucky they are to find love after such a terrible happening. They're right exactly where they're supposed to be.*

"Not as adventurous as he is, of course," Marge says humbly, like the war was an adventure.

Gale only manages to escape when several of Marge's brothers take him out back for a smoke. They amicably threaten his life for a while, then switch to trading war stories, then fall silent, just smoking.

Gale takes it as an opportunity to excuse himself early, feeling nauseous and overwhelmed and ashamed for fleeing from his own party.

He takes a shower and jacks off quickly thinking about things he promised he wouldn't think about, and then he's ashamed for that, too.

The morning after, Gale comes down the stairs to find Walt telling him he's got a letter.

The envelope is off white and addressed in familiar lopsided chicken scratch to *Buck Cleven at 23 Marion Ln.*

In the corner under 'Return To:' it says, *John C. Egan*, and he's writing from Wilmington, right where he told Gale he would be, ostensibly doing test flights at the New Castle base in Delaware.

It shouldn't be such a surprise; Gale is the one who gave him the address.

And yet it strikes him mute and immobile in the Spencer family kitchen.

He's still out there. He's still John Egan. Somewhere in this country, he still has his dark hair and his neat little mustache and his big feet hanging over the edge of a bed. Gale has been in mourning for him, but he's still there. He still gives enough of a shit about Gale Cleven to write him a letter. The room where they fucked exists somewhere on the other side of the ocean in the same world where Gale is standing now.

From his seat at the table, Walt says, "Gale? Are you alright?"

Gale looks up at Walt as if in a dream and nods before going upstairs to shove the envelope into his suitcase, unopened.

Over the following weeks, Marge continues on slipping into Gale's bed at night, but her nightgowns are more demure than the first one, and half the time she has her hair tied up in pincurls under a silk scarf or a face full of cold cream. She scoots in warmly under his covers, puts her hand on his chest, and goes to sleep, just there to be close to him.

When Marge sleeps, her hands and feet twitch like a puppy running after a sleep squirrel. She breathes deeply and steadily, except when she sighs with her voice in it, as if someone in her dream told her something unbearably disappointing.

Gale doesn't sleep much. He's an empty outline of a man. He's a piece of driftwood. He clings onto Marge's hand, and he drifts.

Every morning, they wake up together and brush their teeth side by side in the upstairs bathroom. Gale puts on some of the new civilian clothes he bought in town, always checking for wrinkles or holes or stains.

They have a few weeks to do what they please as they plan the wedding, so Marge starts making her letters come true.

She shows Gale the seafoam green taffeta she picked out for the bridesmaids dresses, makes him roast dinner with potatoes and carrots, and bakes ten pecan pies and enters the best one in the county fair.

She puts on overalls and rubber boots to take him out to explore the Spencer family farm, interspersed with white lilac trees that drop their tiny petals in snowlike drifts. She shows Gale the valley out past the edge of the cow pasture, the lightning bugs that blink on and off, the wildflowers in the woods. They check each other for wood ticks when they get back, running hesitant fingers under the edges of hems and over scalps.

She takes him to her family's church. The Andersens sit in front, and the Bjorklands sit behind. Pastor Brown keeps them for an hour after the service to interview Gale about airborne warfare, and he says, with his gnarled hand on Gale's shoulder, "Welcome home, son."

There are things Gale needs to do before the wedding, too, and he hasn't done any of them.

He should make sure his uniform is in proper order, all the medals and patches and pins in the right places. He should find it hard to keep his hands off his fiancée. He should be out shopping for a house for them to live in. He should make sure his best man knows when the goddamn wedding is.

Gale still wants it. He keeps feeling the need to check with himself.

He can see the wedding. He wants it.

He can see himself smiling, cleanly shaven, his uniform shined up and pressed and perfect, his hair in a perfect swoop over his forehead.

He can see Marge Spencer with a gauzy white veil across her grinning face, her cute crinkling nose.

He can see the cake and the pastor and the guests and the presents.

He can see them chuckling and kissing at the end of the ceremony while the whole place bursts with applause and joyous whistles. He wants that.

Oh, and Bucky, too— standing just a step behind Gale, his big broad chest and shoulders under his dress greens, huge hands clasped in front of him like a little kid in an antique shop, mustache freshly trimmed, dark eyes sparkling, movie star grin. Jesus.

He gets another letter from Bucky about a week after the first one.

Marge's mother, Minnie, distributes the mail between Walt, Marge, and Gale as they sit in the living room like it's a particularly lucky morning in Stalag Luft III.

Buck Cleven, Gale's says in the center of the envelope. It's lopsided and stutteringly written over several times, like the pen was running out of ink. Gale wants to be sick.

"Aw, Bucky! That's nice that he wrote you!" Marge says warmly, leaning over Gale's arm to read the return address, then settling back against the sofa just as easy to go back to her own letter, a transcript from college. "Did you tell him to bring his dress uniform when he comes out?"

Gale clears his throat and nods, dropping a kiss into Marge's hair as he goes to put the letter away somewhere he doesn't have to look at it. He sniffs it on his way up the stairs, just to see, but it just smells like paper.

At some point between dreamy outings into nature and avoiding eye contact with his suitcase, Gale walks past Marge's bedroom and sees a pile of open letters on her bed that makes his blood run cold, until he gets closer and recognizes his own cramped handwriting.

Marge has been rereading the letters he sent from Europe, the way he would reread the letters she sent him from America.

Dear Marge, each letter begins.

In the middle, he's not sure who wrote the things he's reading. He wrote her stories about Bucky, flying, missions, the prison camp— No wonder she thinks of him as adventurous. He made it all sound like a romantic, compelling action picture. He proposed to marry her with all the same words and stories and references she'd hinted at him to use— the fair, the children, playing together out on the playground.

And each letter ends,

Sincerely,
Gale Cleven

A third letter from Bucky is sitting on the entryway table for him

when he gets back to the Spencers' house one day after a walk around the farm.

Buck Cleven it says, with a tiny little drawing of a B-17 next to it in blue ink. Enticing, like he knows Gale hasn't been opening the envelopes.

Bucky must be wondering by now why Gale hasn't responded, but it hasn't been so long as to be beyond the realm of normality yet. He's cutting it close on the wedding information, but Bucky won't mind, will he? Best case scenario, Gale sends him the invite so late he can't rearrange his schedule to make it.

And then the Spencers have a neighborhood party for the 4th of July, and everything falls apart.

In the morning, Marge and Minnie wake up early to make an army's worth of salads and goodies, sniping at each other about who keeps on getting in whose way in the kitchen.

There are fireworks going off already. They started on July 1st. They all sound like AA guns. The sound is different but it's not different enough.

In the afternoon, people start showing up in their cars, parking in colorful rows in the bit of pasture that Walt cleared off for the occasion.

Fireworks.

When one of the little townie kids sets off a firecracker in the driveway, Gale excuses himself and goes to sit in the upstairs bathroom for a while, staring into space thinking about happily listening for distant explosions in the stalag. It was different enough then, somehow. At least there, Bucky would touch his face when everything was over.

Fireworks! Celebration! The first 4th of July since V-E Day!

In the evening, as the blue dusk gathers, they serve ice cream and cake from the picnic tables on the front lawn, and when Gale only partakes of the ice cream—really savoring it, pushing it around the

bowl, letting it melt—Marge offhandedly remarks, “Maybe we should just skip the cake,” and Gale—

Gale says, “What?” and everyone looks at him, and he realizes it’s the first he’s spoken in a long time.

Marge looks at him too, halfway through laughing. “Well, at the wedding,” she says slowly, smiling like it’s a joke between them, tipping her chin down charmingly. “You know, I’m not much for cake either, so why bother with it? We could do ice cream instead. Or, ooh, cookies!”

She hits her hand against her friend’s arm, and the friend gasps delightedly and says, “Fun!”

Gale frowns down at his bowl and shakes his head. “But,” he says, “I want cake.”

He can see it, vanilla with white frosting, lacy details in delicate icing. Powdered sugar. He feels it in his stomach. He wants the cake.

The townie kids are setting off more firecrackers behind the house now, screaming and giggling.

Marge laughs again, putting her manicured hand on his arm to lift his ice cream bowl up closer to his face, like he can’t see it. “You don’t *like* cake, Gale,” she reminds him in a teasing voice.

Boom. *Boom*. Crack!

Gale swallows. “But—” He forces a laugh back to her, but it doesn’t sound right. He feels his teeth aching in his gums. “It’s a wedding. There has to be cake.” He sees the smiles fading at his tone but he can’t reign it in for some reason.

BOOM

Someone has set off a proper firework somewhere on the property, and Gale’s whole body flinches at its combustion.

His ice cream bowl is in the grass.

He’s standing up.

Marge is at his side, touching his elbow, softly saying, “Gale, come on, it’s okay, honey, it was just—”

“What is the *point* of doing it if we don’t do it *right?!?*” Gale shouts, yanking himself out of her grip, rounding on her like a wild animal.

He’s never spoken to Marge like that before in his life.

He sounds like his father fresh off a bender. He sounds like himself, up in a fort forcing his co-pilot to risk everyone’s lives for just a few more weeks in the meat grinder.

Marge stares at him with huge eyes, her eyebrows quivering up in the middle, and then she glances around at all the people in her life who love her and are shocked at Gale for treating her this way. “Well, then I guess we’ll have cake,” she squeaks uncertainly, with a little trembling laugh.

Gale turns and storms into the house as the fireworks show finally starts.

He makes a beeline for the telephone, shoving the rotary around into the number he wants to dial.

BOOM BOOM SCREEEEEEEE BOOM, it goes outside.

She answers on the third ring, saying, “Cleven Residence,” with a creaky little voice that makes him think she was in bed already, in spite of the fireworks.

Still, Gale can barely wait to get it out. “Mom,” he says, rushed. “It’s me. It’s Gale.”

“Oh, Gale!” she exclaims, clearly surprised. He stopped by to see her when he got to Wyoming, but she’s been dodging him since then. She said she didn’t want to come to the engagement party because she didn’t have any new clothes, as if he’s not the one paying for her to get them. “What’s—”

“I just— I just— I—” Gale stutters, like he did when he was a little child and too upset to speak properly.

“Alright, then. Settle down,” she says, just like she’d say then.

Gale falls silent until he has his whole sentence and the next one planned out clearly, until he can feel the tongue in his mouth ready to

say them. "I've got something I wanted to ask you," he says. "Something I've been wondering for a long time."

His mother sighs down the phone line. "Uh-huh, what is it?"

Gale feels it stick in his throat like it has a million times over the years.

His mother hums impatiently.

BOOM

The kitchen floods with golden light that slowly fades to darkness.

"Why did you stay with him?" he asks, finally.

It's so strange.

Gale has never asked, because he thought he knew what she'd say already, but he's still so ready to hear it.

'He was my husband,' she'll say, 'and I loved him. I loved him so much and so hard and for so long that I was willing to do anything to stay with him. I loved him so much I was helpless to protect you from it. It was the harder choice, but I chose it anyways, even though it destroyed everything.'

But she doesn't say that.

"He was my husband," she says. "It wasn't easy for a wife to leave her husband in those days."

"It wasn't easy staying with him either," Gale replies, like it's torn out of him.

BOOM CRACK BOOM

His mother goes quiet. "It would have been harder if we'd left, Gale."

He can't answer. He can't speak. He can't even breathe.

"I used to think about it," she finally says, softly like she always says everything. "I'd make lists in my head of what I'd need to do. I'd have to hide enough money to pay for a meeting with the lawyer, enough to get us a ride to the city, pack up our things, put you in a new school, find an apartment where they take single women with children, a job that would pay me my wages to me and not him,

maybe.” She shakes her head. “That doesn’t count food. Or the divorce. I don’t know, Gale. I could never hide the money. He’d always find it.”

Unbidden, Gale makes his own list:

He’d have to call off the wedding, say goodbye to all the lovely Spencers forever, pack his things, buy a train ticket, leave Casper in disgrace, give up on the Army, go back to school, perhaps work at a college, think of something to tell the guys at reunions, date a few girls to keep up appearances, maybe move to a city where that sort of thing is more acceptable, find a place to live with a big warm bed and a porch with flowers and without too many gossiping neighbors, though of course Bucky would charm them all no matter what kind of sin they were living in— Gale stops himself there.

“Okay, Ma,” he whispers down the line. “Thanks. Sorry for bothering you on the Fourth. I’ll call again soon.”

Another letter from Bucky is sitting on the kitchen counter.

Buck Cleven, it says.

KA-BOOM! echoes outside. Red light flashes and fades slowly through the windows.

Gale picks the envelope up and opens it, and he immediately feels hot, like he’s doing something unforgivably embarrassing by reading a letter addressed to him.

Bucky doesn’t write, *My dearest Gale*, or *My handsomest, bravest, most dashing, most daring, most darling*—

He doesn’t write ‘Dear’ anything. The letter starts like they’re halfway through a conversation already— halfway through an argument.

Did you give me a fake address, you chucklehead?!, is the first line on the page.

Gale laughs, and it sounds humiliatingly wet coming out of him.

Well I suppose your busy with settling in and all that, Bucky goes on. *That’s all right, Buck, I’ll forgive you before you know it. I’ve been busy too*

if you care to know. Lots of different kinds of planes to fly out here. No bandits or bogies but a goose did give me a mean look the other day.

Miss you Buck.

*Love,
John C. Egan*

Gale immediately flips the page over, but that's it.

He doesn't know what he expected.

SCREEEEEEEE BOOM! This time the windows light up yellow.

Gale hikes upstairs to read the rest of Bucky's letters, shoved haphazardly into his suitcase as fast as he could get them in there, but the story is the same each time. There's not a proper greeting to be seen. Nothing to acknowledge the depth of history between them. Just —

Well Buck. Here we are.

You won't believe what happened at breakfast Buck.

Buck if you were out here flying I think my traffic controler would be a hell of a lot less irritating.

He writes in shorter, less witty sentences than when he speaks, and he doesn't say anything life changing. There don't seem to be hidden meanings.

He just writes, matter of fact, about the life he's leading while Gale isn't there, a temporary summary so there isn't so much distance to fill in when they find their way back to each other.

He doesn't ask how Marge is. He makes no promises. Recalls no fond or painful memories. He doesn't ask about the wedding at all except to say, *Let me know where/when to show up for that best man appointment.*

He doesn't confess his undying affections or say he can't live like this anymore. He doesn't ask Gale to come out to Delaware. He doesn't ask Gale if he's sure, or if he's happy, or if he's in love.

He draws lumpy doodles of boats and cars and planes in the margins.

And he signs in his same small, lopsided handwriting:

Miss you.

*Love,
John C. Egan*

Gale reads them all again, hungry, making a neat pile of the papers on the bed, each sorted with its own proper envelope. There isn't enough to read. They just smell like paper. They taste like paper too. He reads the addresses in Bucky's handwriting. He pauses each time at 'Love' and 'Miss.'

The letters aren't trying to convince Gale of anything, Bucky's not much of a writer anyway, and yet somehow it's like the fireworks are inside Gale's body now.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, SCREEEEE-BOOM. Red, white, orange, purple.

His heart pounds like a snare drum.

Bucky doesn't have to convince him. He doesn't have to tell Gale what their life together would be like. Gale knows. He already fucking knows.

Bucky would go out to town and bring home everything Gale needs. He'd sit next to him in bars and tell stories and hold court with the neighborhood drunks. He'd touch Gale's face at night and fuck him in the morning. He'd get all vulnerable and desperate when Gale talked big, but he'd cut him right down to size when Gale needed him to. He'd call him Gale when he was feeling especially tender and Buck the rest of the time, and when he wanted to rile Gale up, Bucky would call him sweetheart and dollface and darling. He'd whisper all his happy plans and pipe dreams into the space in between them, and he'd have Gale completely convinced, every time, despite his best efforts, and then he'd do his utmost to make those plans actually happen, because he's energetic and loyal and gregarious and nothing like Gale's father when it really comes down to it. None of these things need to happen in the idyllic Wyoming countryside. They could happen anywhere. They could happen in a warzone or a prison camp or the lowest layer of hell.

Gale is still huddled up in Marge's brothers' room with the letters when Marge finds him, and she sighs as the grand finale of the

firework show starts outside.

BOOM CRACK BOOM SPARKLE... B-BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM.

White, white, red, blue, green, gold.

Sometimes Gale can almost mistake fear for arousal, the blood pumping hard and hot through his body, his heart rate picking up as adrenaline rushes his system.

He reaches out for Marge when she comes close enough, interrupting her as she's saying, "I'm sorry about all the noise, sweetie, but—" with a hard kiss. He can do it, this time.

She laughs, surprised, against his mouth, and gets out, "Gale—" before he kisses her again, holding her waist over her white dress, which changes colors with the fireworks outside.

He can do it. He can sleep with her. He can do it this time. He can do it.

BOOM BOOM BOOM CRACK SCREEEE BOOM CRACK BOOM

Gale closes his eyes tight and imagines himself over Marge on the bed, naked and panting and laughing through it. He *wants* that. He wants to be that man. He just feels like being sick again.

BOOM KABOOM SCREEEEEEEE CRACK

He guides her to sit down and then pushes her onto her back, laying on top of her unrelentingly. Bucky's letters crunch and crumple underneath them.

BOOM BOOM BOOM SCREEEEEEEE BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM

She softly holds his arms just below his shoulders and kisses him hesitantly, stiff and nervous against his onslaught.

Shame rises up in him like a flood, torrential in his insides, as he pulls up one of her legs so he can fit better between them, like Bucky used to do to him.

He wishes he wanted her. He wishes he'd died in the war. It's easy to want a life you aren't actually going to have to live.

Marge pushes him away. "Gale?" she asks. "Are you okay?"

He's weeping.

"I can do it," he insists, blubbering like a baby who fell off his bike.

With an overwhelming wave of grief, Gale thinks that he could have gone through with everything, if not for the war. If not for John Egan and his dazzling smile sparkling over at Gale in the dark, Gale thinks maybe he could have lived his whole life without ever learning what his heart and body were really for, and maybe he would have been happy enough to stay that way, shriveled and shivering until the end of his days. He could have at least kept it all in order until after the wedding. He used to be so good at it, but that's just not the world he lives in anymore.

"Gale, sweetheart, talk to me, please," Marge is saying, sitting next to him on the bed now.

Gale crushes the heels of his hands into his eyes until it aches and his vision swims with blotchy apparitions.

The fireworks show must be over.

Everything is dead silent now except for the crickets in the fields rubbing their little legs together, singing their song immemorial.

The night is like one of Marge's lovely letters, of course.

The air breezing in through the open window is the warm kind that feels like a caress on bare arms. It smells of sweet lilacs and gunpowder. It's everything Marge promised, and Gale is miserable.

He lets himself feel the anguish of it distinctly and on purpose.

He doesn't want to be here.

He doesn't want to be here with Marge.

He doesn't want to have sex with her now because he's never wanted to have sex with her.

He doesn't want to be in Wyoming, getting ready to marry the loveliest girl in the whole world, after somehow surviving the deadliest bombardment group in the deadliest war in history.

Bucky is doing a fine job of being Gale's friend in spite of everything, but Gale doesn't actually want him to.

Gale had spent this whole time agonizingly aware that he'd been trying to fit Bucky into the Marge-shaped hole in his life. It was sick, but at least he knew it, except that now he suddenly knows he was doing the opposite, and Marge was never going to fit.

It all mixes together, but maybe it's supposed to.

"Gale, what's going on?" Marge says softly, laying her hand on his arm.

He shakes his head. "I don't wanna lose you, Marge," he croaks. "I don't want to lose— everything."

"Well, hold on, you're not about to, honey," she says, putting her finger under his chin to turn his face toward her.

Gale meets her eyes miserably. They're clear and cornflower blue and steady, so confused, so concerned, but not really scared, frightened for their future, more tenuous with every breath, not like she should be.

"We're getting married, Gale," she tells him, like he forgot, as she strokes his hair and wipes his tears. "You're not going to lose anything."

He feels his face crumple under the weight of it all. "I can't," he ekes out.

Marge's hands still on his face.

"I can't marry you, Marge," Gale grates out. His voice barely makes a sound.

Marge goes completely silent. He can't even hear her breathe. Her hands disappear from his face.

There's a jolt of the bouncy mattress as she scoots away.

"What are you talking about?" she whispers at length.

He wipes his hand down his wet face. "I can't," he repeats helplessly.

"You met someone, while you were there," she says. Not a question.

Gale has the insane impulse to deny it, or to clarify that he met this 'someone' before he ever started going steady with Marge, but what would be the result of that stupid goddamn conversation?

He shakes his head, shrugging, hopeless.

Marge's voice hardens, and she says, "You said you would miss me every second, but you didn't, did you?"

Gale swallows with difficulty. "Did you miss me?" he asks back, finally looking at her.

She looks like he's never seen her, tear-streaked and disgusted with him, her lovely lip curled in a sneer. "How dare you ask me that?" she snaps, shoving herself up from the bed and stalking over to the window. "I waited for you *for years*. You don't think there was anyone else who caught my eye in all that time?"

Gale is awash with shame and relief and fear, shivering with it. He shakes his head. He didn't think about it. He doesn't know.

"Did you even come here to get married, Gale?" she asks him then, the tears streaking into her voice, making it shake and creak. "Or did you just want to confirm I wasn't worth sticking around for before you took off?"

Gale doesn't know how to make her understand. "You're the most amazing woman I've ever met in my whole life, Marge," he says with a voice like an open wound, "but I think— I think we're still playing pretend."

He wonders if Marge understands what he's saying.

Her face has drawn closed and cold, a wall rising around her as she folds her thin arms across herself like she's protecting a gut wound.

He finds himself wanting to help her somehow, but it isn't his job, suddenly. He's not the solution anymore; he's the problem. Jesus, he's been the problem for a long while now, whether she knew it or not.

"Go home," she whispers, at last. She holds a thin, white knuckled grip on the windowsill. Her pleasing low voice sounds reedy and barely there. "I'll— I can cancel everything. My dad will give you a ride into town. Just— Get out of here. Go home, Gale."

So Gale packs up his clothes and shaving kit and Bucky's letters into

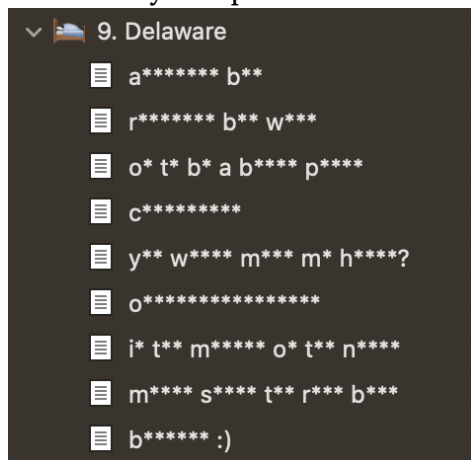
his suitcase and keeps a tight grip on it all the way to the train station.

Chapter End Notes

welllllllllll, folks, sometimes ice cream is ice cream and sometimes ice cream is becoming utterly deranged because of the emotionally fraught anal sex you had with your boy best friend.

hope everyone is doing well!!!!!! thank you all SO MUCH for the comments on the last chapter!!! i'd love to collect more of your hopes and predictions now that you know a little more about the direction we're going in, if you are so inclined!

and here's your "preview" for the last chapter lol ☐



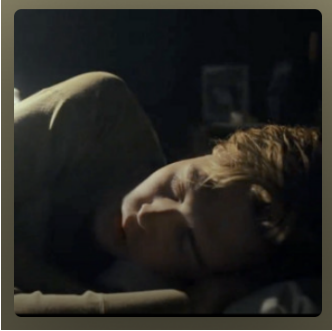
Delaware

Chapter Notes

look..... i'm so normal

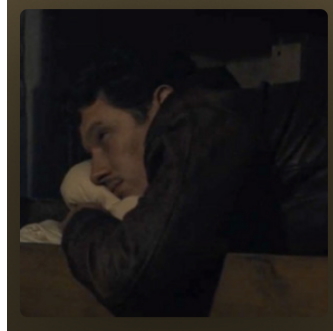
this one has a little bit of everything, which i guess means there's something for everyone and something for no one.

also, here are my little playlists for this fanfic :)



[gale](#)

[uoib](#)



[john](#)

[uoib](#)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Gale only catches his reflection in the window outside Bucky's apartment the moment after he rings the door bell.

His eyes are red rimmed and sunken, framed by dark bags, beard stubble, and an unkempt, dirty mop of hair.

He hadn't slept much on the train. He hadn't slept at all on the bus from Dover to Wilmington or in the taxi from the station to Bucky's door. He hadn't thought about how he looked, what Bucky might see, or like, or want, but now he does suddenly.

"Christ," he mutters, trying to comb his hair back with his fingers, and while he's at it, Bucky opens his front door.

Gale freezes.

Bucky smiles at the sight of him, as ever, mouth falling slightly open.

Gale's heart blooms in his presence, as always.

In just his officer's uniform button down with no tie on, his hair sweaty and messy from a day of work under a cap, a manic tinge to his grin, he looks like a picture of himself in the stalag, still so handsome even disheveled and repressed.

Gale isn't looking much better.

He's not even supposed to be here. But here he is.

"What in the— Buck!" Bucky exclaims. He laughs like this is nothing more complicated than a surprise visit, only a strange quirk to his eyebrows betraying his confusion. "The hell are you doing in Delaware, you crazy bastard? You can't answer a letter but you show up in person?"

Gale gives up on straightening his hair, shifting his eyes wandering off down the street as he replies, "Hey, John."

"Hey, John," Bucky copies in an exaggeratedly growly voice. "Would you just get in here already?" He grabs Gale by the bicep to haul him in.

The warmth of his hand sends a shock through Gale's system. Bucky feels that good just touching Gale's arm, and Gale is here to touch him all over. He's here to touch him and not tell him no about anything, with no ominous marriage hovering on the horizon of his sights.

He has the mind to kiss Bucky the minute the front door closes, but Bucky stops him from turning in with an amicable clap on the chest.

"Jo, I want you to meet Buck Cleven, my best friend," Bucky announces to his apartment.

To the woman in his apartment.

She sits at his kitchen table with no shoes on, just stockings. Her white blond hair is pinned up in curls on the back of her head. She has an Army Air Forces uniform on too, the woman's version with wide legged trousers, because she's a woman.

A woman sitting in Bucky's apartment, all comfortable, like she's been here before.

Gale looks to Bucky, but Bucky isn't looking back as he bustles back

into his house going, “Buck, this is Jo. She’s a test pilot, too, out at Newcastle.”

The table is set with two plates of chicken and potatoes.

Gale has never felt stupider in his whole life.

Jo is getting up from the table, smiling and holding her hand out for a handshake. “Good to meet you, Major,” she tells him. Her voice is girlish and sweet, at odds with her strict look and tone. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

He breaks out in chills as the full weight of humiliation washes through him.

She’s perfectly charming.

When he doesn’t manage to shake her hand or answer her back, Bucky gives a strained laugh and says, “Buck here’s shy. Doesn’t gamble, smoke, drink, dance, or—” He gives a considering look. “Actually, you know, I managed to get him to crack on a couple of those over the course of—” He raises his eyebrows and gestures expansively. “—everything.”

Everything.

Gale has no fucking idea what to do, here. He’s still holding his idiotically presumptuous suitcase. It feels impossibly heavier with every second.

Jo looks between them curiously, clearly taking in some of the tension pulsating off of Gale.

Her gloves and hat and shoes are sitting in the entryway of Bucky’s apartment.

“Say, John,” she says, “should I—”

“We were just sitting down for dinner,” Bucky interrupts, his back to them as he pulls another plate and cup out of his cupboard. “You should join us.”

Jo shrugs, sitting back at the table, and raises her eyebrows at Gale as if to say, Want to?

Gale shakes himself. He tries to get some margin of his bearings. He doesn’t know which way’s up.

Bucky's home is sparse but lived-in, a stack of newspapers and mail on the kitchen table. There's a beige sofa and chairs in the sitting room that look new, a record player and a radio. The kitchen is tiled with white and black, with a round wooden table at the center of it, where Bucky places a third plate with chicken on it, a glass of water and silver cutlery.

Gale can't say what he came here to say, can he? In front of one of Bucky's girls.

He puts his suitcase down in the entryway with a thud that makes Bucky and Jo both look at him askance, and, as if in a trance, he goes to sit in his given seat at the table.

Bucky sits down too, and says, "Wine?" holding up a bottle.

Gale almost laughs. "No," he says, and then, as they start eating— He can't quite keep it in. "So he's John and you're Jo. He give you that nickname?"

Bucky chokes with his fork in his mouth.

Jo blinks, and then snorts into her wine glass. She puts it back, chuckling, "No, I can't say that he did. My name's Josephine, so it comes with the territory."

Well, what kind of a guy would give someone his own name when he's just met them, after all?

Gale nods. He doesn't touch his food.

He's the stupidest schmuck on this side of the Atlantic. At no point while he was trying to replace Bucky did he ever consider that Bucky would want to replace him back.

While Gale sits there helplessly, Bucky munches on his dinner and launches into a long extolment of Jo's flight skills, her expertise on a Flying Fortress, how they really could have used her over in the England if the Army had any sense, which Jo agrees with heartily, though she continues to give Gale a curious look.

On the train here, he had been audaciously coaching himself on needing to accept that when people saw him and Bucky together, living together over years, eating together in restaurants, drinking together in bars, they might think, *Queers*. But it turns out people weren't going to see shit, because Bucky doesn't even want him here.

“Major Cleven,” Jo interrupts at some point, giving Bucky an ironic smile, “where have you been staying since you got back?”

Gale stares at her for a long moment.

Earlier today, he had ducked into the tiny bathroom compartment of the train to Delaware and had, burning alive with mortification, washed out his asshole with the paper towels and weak stream of water available from the sink, and this woman is asking him where’s been since the war.

Finally, he makes himself say, “Wyoming. Where I’m from.”

Jo nods encouragingly. “That sounds nice.”

“Oh, yeah, I bet it’s been *real* nice, huh, Buck?” Bucky says, tilting his head, his grin absolutely menacing now. “Going home to the soft and tender ministrations of your fiancée. See, Jo, Buck has this girl he’s been going steady with since before the war. Her name is—”

“I don’t have a fiancée,” Gale interrupts.

Bucky drops his fork with a clatter. “—Marge,” he finishes, looking haunted, eyes wide.

There’s a long beat of silence.

Gale clears his throat. “I called off the wedding.”

Jo says, “Oh. I’m sorry?”

Gale shakes his head, unable to clarify at the moment that it isn’t exactly something to be sorry about.

And then Bucky gives a peal of unhinged laughter, and Gale feels like he’s back in the stalag. “But that’s impossible, Jo!” he says. “Buck and Marge are in love!”

Jo turns to him, long suffering, and calmly says, “John.”

But Bucky is busy staring Gale down across their dinner, and Gale feels absolutely insane.

“And he never let us forget it!” Bucky goes on, waving his wine glass, the absolute picture of the man who used to hit imaginary baseballs in the yard. “He even kept one of her letters in his wallet, all through the entire goddamn war!”

Gale's stomach drops like a payload, swooping down, heavy but weightless. Bucky's always been so fixated on that fucking letter, and he doesn't even know—

And then Gale thinks, Fine, sure, and he says, "Still got that letter, John," as he half stands to get access to his back pocket. "Why don't I show you?"

Bucky looks up at him with an indescribably hateful hurt look in his eyes, jaw ticking, and he says, insanely, "Gale," in a voice like Gale is the one being unfair.

Gale pulls out his wallet, and there it is, in the vinyl slot where a photo might go, its edges worn, going yellow and gray after years in his pocket. The paper has started to split everywhere he creased it, so he has to unfold the thing gingerly. He spreads it flat on Bucky's dinner table and pushes it over to him.

Bucky doesn't look down at first, staring at Gale like he could make it disappear off the tabletop by sheer force of will.

Gale jerks his chin at the letter stubbornly.

Bucky's eyes flick down, and then his face changes in an instant.

"Gale—" he says again, choking on it.

Jo politely looks away, gulping down her wine with her eyes on the ceiling.

Greenland is like you'd probably expect Buck, it says at the top. Gale's read the damn thing enough times to know every word by heart by now.

Cold. Windy. A bitch to land. They said I can send mail back from here so I figured I'd send a letter like you wanted.

Bucky'd written only half of the story of the unicorn incident at the bar, then abruptly switched to describing the flight over with plenty of complaints about his navigator, who didn't end up surviving long in combat, as it turns out.

And then, at the bottom,

Miss you already Buck!

Love,

Words that Gale had reread and puzzled over so many times it seems like his brainwaves would've smudged the ink right off the page by now. Miss you already. Love.

"When did you put *that* in there?" Bucky asks him raggedly. His chest is heaving with each breath now, and his face is marred with lines of confusion.

Gale meets his eyes.

What is there left to lose?

"Day I got it," he says. His voice barely comes out.

Bucky stands abruptly and says, "Hey, Jo, I think we're gonna have to raincheck on dessert, sweetheart. Walk you out?"

"Finally," Jo replies, jumping up too. "Don't bother, you absolute maniac. Buck, it was lovely to meet you."

Gale manages to stand up and nod a goodbye at her out of sheer ingrained politeness.

Bucky walks her out anyway, for all the good it does, holding her hat for her while she puts on her gloves.

"I'm showing you how to make carbonara next time," she says severely, "so don't forget how to boil water again."

And then the door clicks behind her with finality and weight.

Bucky doesn't turn around to look at Gale again.

He rests his forehead against his front door, then knocks it there, hard.

"Buck," he says roughly, "You gotta help me out here. I can't fuck you at your wedding. I promised myself I wouldn't, and I'm not going to."

He still doesn't come back to the table, so Gale gets up and goes to him.

"Would you listen to me?" Gale says, pulling him around by the shoulder. "There's not going to be any wedding."

Bucky turns to him with eyes like smoldering ashes. He leans back

against the door, shoving his hands in his pockets, tilting his head back, stubbornly pursing his mouth.

“Yeah? You’re gonna have to convince me,” he says.

Gale gives an incredulous laugh, hands on his hips. “What, you want a notarized letter?”

Bucky looks down his nose. “Wouldn’t hurt,” he says. And then, “Why are you here, Buck?”

Aside from the clothes and the teeth-baring declarations, Gale suddenly realizes the real reason Bucky is reminding him so much of Luft III. There’s a familiar tension in his shoulders and his arms, the way he’s holding his jaw, the depth of his eyes, the jitter of his movements.

He’s frightened, and he’s pretending not to be. He’s scared Gale showed up here uninvited and barged into his house to hurt him. So if he needs convincing, Gale can do that.

Gale swallows, nodding, taking a step back to allow Bucky some more space. “I, uh—” he says. He fiddles with his waistband and frowns at the floor. He’d thought about what to say on the train but his mind has gone blank suddenly. He had, humiliatingly, rehearsed it. “I’m not sure how to put it.”

“Well, give it a shot, Buck, for Christ’s sakes,” Bucky mutters.

Gale tries to picture it, his throttling impulse, his suffocating obsession with a future that was never going to be his, and to catch a thread of what he’d come here intending to say.

“Back in Germany, you told me I wanted everything to be normal,” he remembers.

Bucky snorts.

Gale clears his throat, running a restlessly hand over his hair. “But the truth is,” he says, “that was normal.”

When he sneaks a peek, Bucky frowns at him but doesn’t speak, his blue eyes narrow and burning, listening with that furious focus he gets, head tilted back.

Gale can’t stand to look at him all of a sudden, so he tells the furniture

and the entryway and the tile floor, “Kept away from the bed I wanted to sleep in, scrounging for food, following orders, feeling watched, like I was always one sideways look away from a lynching...” He nods. “That’s just life, I thought. Only difference was, you were there with me.” His voice breaks, horrifically, and he ducks his head. “So in some ways, it was a better life than what I had before.”

Bucky makes a little noise, a breath before speaking, but Gale plows on, “I always thought if I just stayed the course, I’d be okay. If I followed all the rules and regulations to a T, no one could catch me and kill me.” He shakes his head. “I’d picture Gale Cleven living the way he was supposed to, outside of myself, like I was someone else watching a motion picture. Can’t say when I started doing it.” First time he ever saw a movie, maybe. Before that, even, before he can remember.

He looks up again and Bucky’s face is breaking open, eyebrows going up in the center, lips twisting down on the sides.

“And then I met you,” he says, frowning at the memory. “In your underwear in the middle of the night. You were just exactly yourself. And you made me want to stay in my body. So none of it worked right anymore.”

Bucky purses his mouth hard, eyes glassy. “Hell of a way to put it, Buck,” he rasps.

Gale tries to give him a smile, but it’s too difficult. He presses his lips together and stares into Bucky’s eyes like he can push the disgusting depth of his feelings through into his brain matter.

He says faintly, “I wanted to want a life with Marge but no matter how hard I tried to want it, I—” He struggles to get it out at all. “—I just wanted you. I still wanted to be the man I imagined,” he says, “but I wanted you worse.”

Bucky has gone so still Gale wonders if he’s even breathing.

“I know I hurt you,” he whispers, “by trying to have both. But it took me a good long while to realize that wanting is reason enough to have something.” He sucks in a deep breath. Maybe that’s the crux of it.

All this time, he’s been thinking of Bucky as the vice, but maybe his denial was the vice. Maybe giving in can be temperance. Or maybe life just isn’t made up of impulses and righteousness. Maybe there’s just what you want and what you allow yourself to have.

"I've been wracking my brains for another excuse, like the war or the lack of women," Gale says, "but I think maybe I don't need one. That's why I'm here."

Bucky stays silent, and Gale shuffles his feet.

"John, I—" He hesitates, unsure why he feels the need to ask permission and then goes through with it anyway. "Can I touch you?"

Bucky visibly gulps but then jerks his chin in a nod, pulling his hands out of his pockets just in time for Gale to throw himself into his arms.

"Christ," Gale exhales in relief, squeezing himself close with his arms around Bucky's waist. It's like walking into a warm house after hours out in the cold. It's like an orange after weeks of gruel.

"What?" Bucky cracks weakly. "You miss me or something?"

Gale holds him tighter, his thick, warm body pressing up everywhere. "Yeah, I missed you, Bucky," he breathes into Bucky's hair, just behind his ear.

There's a pause wherein they both wait for the other to make a joke, but no one does.

After a moment, Bucky's hands come up and nudge him back, taking Gale's face and neck between them as he hoarsely asks, "Why'd you keep my letter?"

He knows why. He must already know, but he needs Gale to say it out loud.

It's not as easy as it always was to say to Marge. Maybe that means something.

Gale nods, clenching his hands around Bucky's waist to really impress the meaning on him. "I put that letter in my wallet because I loved you, John," Gale tells him with a still-cracking voice, staring into his dear and lovely face, "and it's still there because that hasn't changed. Lot's changed since then, but not that."

Bucky gives a strange little laugh, and one of his hands moves to touch Gale's bottom lip softly, a press of his thumb that reaches across oceans and years.

"So, you're not getting married," he confirms.

Gale has to laugh, exasperated. “Jesus,” he says. The tip of Bucky’s thumb slips against his teeth for a second. “No, I’m not getting married, John.”

“And you brought your little suitcase, huh?” Bucky says next, face finally blooming into a grin as he slides his hand around to the back of Gale’s neck, squeezing it slightly.

“Needed something heavy to knock some sense into you,” Gale replies, breaking into a smile too.

Although it’s the hard choice to be here at all, it’s so simple to fall into an easy sarcastic exchange with his best friend in the whole world. Like always, Bucky makes this huge, impossible, crazy thing Gale is doing seem normal and acceptable and funny.

“Not gonna work,” Bucky says. “Buck Cleven just told me he called off his goddamn wedding. Need a bus to knock sense into me now.”

And as their mouths are having one conversation, their bodies are having a different one, just like they’ve always done, calling out to each other in the darkness and meeting each time with sighs of delayed reunion.

Gale steps in closer, his foot between Bucky’s. Bucky cants his hips so Gale can feel him against his pelvis. Gale slides his hands up Bucky’s back against the door. Bucky goes oddly limp, breathing hard.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Gale replies, smiling close to Bucky’s smile, helpless, and then they’re kissing.

Bucky lets out a brokenhearted groan, and Gale licks it out of his mouth hungrily.

To kiss him and know there’s no time limit on it is a feeling that Gale squirmily realizes he’s never imagined in his wildest dreams.

At some point embarrassingly far into necking, Gale remembers and his stomach gives a dropping clench as he pulls away, gasping, “But what about Jo?”

Bucky blinks a few times, dazed, and then snorts. “*Josephine*? That woman is a dyed-in-the-wool homophile,” he says, absently kissing Gale again in the middle of talking, like he can’t stand to stop. “She rebuffed my every attempt to be more than friends. Not that that’s any of your business.”

Gale pushes Bucky harder against the door and says, "It is my business."

Bucky just laughs, his tongue poking out between his teeth, eyebrows up. "And your hypocrite jealousy is charming as always, Buck," he says, hands restlessly readjusting their hold on him. "But I've only got my eye on one lunatic blond pilot at the moment."

"Good," Gale tells him, and kisses him deeply to punctuate it. "That's good, John," he whispers between their mouths.

They press close. Gale feels his nipples going tight, tingling and raw against his shirt fabric.

Bucky makes a noise like a whine that trails into another laugh. "Also, I lied," he says.

Gale quirks his eyebrows in question.

Bucky pushes him back a little and looks him over, grinning, mouth open with it, chest heaving. "I definitely would've fucked you at your wedding if you wanted me to."

Gale shudders a laugh. "Why d'you think I never told you when it was gonna be?"

"Oh yeah?" Bucky snickers. "You thought that'd keep me away, huh?"

How on earth can they be laughing about this? What is it about the place they go when they're alone together?

Gale's body is full of light, pouring through his blood vessels all golden and shivering.

"I wasn't thinking anything," he confesses, pulling Bucky's head close and kissing his forehead, his cheek, his chin. "I was drowning without you, John," he murmurs, low. "Floating out in the wild blue yonder."

Bucky is serious again when Gale finally pulls back, but he pushes a bit of a smile into his mouth and says, "Well, we can't have that."

Gale smiles back, feet on the floor, not floating an inch.

Bucky kisses him again, tenderer than ever, licking at him gently, letting Gale tilt his head for him, and then he says between them, looking dazed, running his palm down Gale's torso to press on the front of his pants, "What do you want? You just say the word, Buck; I

can do whatever you want me to.”

A million different things flash through Gale’s mind as he mindlessly arches his hips up into Bucky’s hand, but he’s spoiled for choice suddenly, standing in Bucky’s offbase apartment, where no one will come knocking without being invited in.

“I don’t know,” he blurts out, frowning. “I don’t know, Bucky, I—”

He cuts off, just holding onto Bucky’s hair and shaking his head.

Bucky turns his chin up and squints out a smile. “Well, well, well,” he remarks, releasing his grip on Gale’s cock through his slacks, “looks like the marvelous King Cleven can’t make his mind up all of a sudden.”

It surprises a breathless laugh out of Gale. “Looks like,” he allows. Then he shakes his head. “I just wanna give you what you want for once, Bucky. That sound alright?”

Bucky pauses for a moment before he sighs, smiling.

“Alright, sweetheart,” he says. He looks like he does when he asks girls to dance, suddenly, cocksure and masculine, all smug, every generous inch of his height drawn up as he tilts his head. “You wanna make me happy, Buck?”

He gives Gale’s shoulders a guiding push, until Gale gets down on his knees, framed between Bucky and the door, and then he unzips his pants.

Gale’s heart pounds. He puts his hands on his thighs to brace himself.

Bucky pulls his cock out from between his fly and cups Gale’s cheek sweetly. “You want to?” He raises his eyebrows quick, staring down serious. “Mmh?” His thick, ruddy cock isn’t all the way hard yet, and somehow that makes it even hotter, the way the heft of it weighs down into a heavy curve.

Gale is awash in sparks. His mouth is full of spit and jack shit else. “Mm,” he answers, nodding a bit, rolling his tongue inside his cheek. “Yeah, go ahead and give it to me,” he says and then relaxes his chin so his lips part just a bit.

Bucky jerks at that. His hand travels roughly to the back of Gale’s head, fingertips spreading through his hair in tingling trails as he

drops his thick cockhead against Gale's slack mouth. A drop of what is presumably precome oozes down his chin.

Bucky's brow furrows severely and he complains, "Buck, open up, come on," and Gale huffs a laugh but he does open up, trying to keep his tongue stuck out over his bottom teeth as Bucky feeds his cock in.

Sucking dick is a part of getting off with John Egan that Gale never quite got his strategy calibrated on. He didn't do it too many times, and when he did, Bucky never lasted long enough for him to learn anything fancy.

"Tilt your head back for me?" Bucky asks next, voice descending, taking a shuffling step closer so he's farther up over Gale's face.

Gale does, unable to do much around his jaw-stretching mouthful but bobble around suckling on the head until Bucky whispers, "Swallow," and pushes his cock farther down when Gale obeys.

His mouth corners stretch. His head hits the door. His knees jolt against the rug. His eyes roll back in his head as he chokes on it. Acidic heat lances through his belly. His dick lurches in his underwear.

Bucky pulls out, shuddering, chest heaving, and checks, strangled, "You okay?"

Gale can't answer, just gives a rough clear of his throat and then takes Bucky's cock back in his mouth and lets him push it down into his throat again, again, again.

Like always, Bucky can't last long when Gale sucks him off, which makes Gale think to himself that he should do it more often. Every day from now until forever, if Bucky likes it so much.

"Good?" Gale rasps after he's swallowed Bucky's load, his voice wrecked, low and rattling.

Bucky laughs raggedly like that's a completely insane question. "That's funny," he pants. "You wanna see my bedroom?"

Bucky's bedroom is as sparse as the rest of his home, with just a few

warm hints of his presence, a pair of trousers folded over a chair, the non-existent corners of his bedding, the petroleum jelly on his nightstand that makes Gale's body wash hot and sweaty in an instant.

Bucky draws him closer, sighing and grinning at the sight of him, giving his hair an affectionate ruffle, twitching and cackling when Gale jabs in at his ticklish sides as revenge, then wrapping long arms around him like the leading man in a movie, kissing him and kissing him in the direction of the bed.

They just kiss on Bucky's bed for a long time. They kiss for so long the late summer sun starts to set and the light turns orange and hazy all around them.

Gale has been hard for an eternity, but Bucky is soft and open and relaxed now, so when Gale makes an impatient noise and goes for Bucky's belt, he laughs and pushes him off and says, "Worse things in life than being patient, huh?"

He pulls Gale's waist in and keeps kissing him. Their clothes are hot and sweaty and abrasive between them. Everything pulses and aches and chafes.

"You're gonna kill me," Gale manages to get out at some point, and Bucky snickers.

"Oh, I don't wanna kill you, Buck," is his rough but delighted reply, but finally, he pushes Gale down flat on the mattress and gets up on his knees between his legs and just stares.

He's so sweet, all slack-jawed and hazy-eyed, sweat glistening on his neck and collarbone, his hair sticking up in three different places. His crucifix has spilled out from his collar and dangles down from his neck, glinting in the orange light. "Gale," he whispers, reverent, running his huge hand down Gale's middle, stopping at his belt buckle. "Look at you in my room."

Gale shakes his head, eyes wandering up to the headboard in disbelief. "You're gonna make me beg you to take my clothes off," he says. "That's what this is, isn't it?"

"Well, I don't hate the idea," Bucky laughs, eyebrows shooting up.

Gale holds in a laugh of his own, even in spite of the frustrated heat rocketing through him, as Bucky comes down close to kiss again, slowly rocking their cocks together through fabric, a burning phantom

sensation of pleasure.

“Nah, I just wanna take my time,” Bucky tells him, rubbing at Gale’s hard, raw nipples now, through his shirt and the singlet under it. “Can you blame a guy?”

Gale scoffs, but it shakes as he arches up. “I think you’ve taken your time already, John,” he says, his voice curling into a growl. “And mine on top of it.”

Bucky smiles down at him fondly, really rubbing now. “You know,” he comments, as if Gale didn’t say anything, “I used to have to lie back and be a good boy for a long while for you to let me get this fresh.”

“Probably half the people in Wilmington,” Gale adds, though it breaks a little at the end as one of Bucky’s thumbs digs in.

But Bucky must take that as begging enough, because he doesn’t stop Gale’s restless fingers from unbuttoning his shirt this time.

He finally, finally strips down, with Gale’s enthusiastic assistance, and then doesn’t waste anymore time taking Gale’s clothes off either, only pausing to kiss and lick and nose at each part of Gale’s body as it appears, even giving a dirty slurp between his legs, over his hole, making his legs try to jolt together with Bucky’s shoulders between them.

Bucky takes off Gale’s undershirt last of all, softly kissing the center of his chest before he lifts up and stares, eyes young and soft.

And Gale has seen him naked before, many times, but never afforded himself the luxury of doing it like this, and he’s suddenly overcome with agitation and rage, that he didn’t.

He wrestles Bucky down onto the bed, and Bucky’s easy as always; he just lets Gale do it, staring up poleaxed, jaw slack as he reaches up to hold Gale’s waist where he sits astride.

Gale doesn’t have words. He burns and burns, like the center of the earth, hot and molten and encased lovingly by nature on all sides. He clenches his teeth against his sudden instinct to cry.

Bucky’s hair lies in sweaty curls across his forehead, spread dark across the white pillow. His mouth is flushed and slick, kissed within an inch of its end. His crucifix on its silver chain lies cockeyed through a dusting of chest hair that continues down his lovely thick torso

where Gale's cock and balls rest heavy, between huge warm shoulders, his arms that flex to tug Gale down for another kiss.

Gale holds him down and kisses him deep, rubbing his dick along Bucky's stomach restlessly and still bizarrely teary-eyed as their nude bodies slide together.

Bucky whimpers under him, begging, "Buck, Buck, can I suck you off now, please?" like he wasn't the one telling Gale to be patient a minute ago.

Gale scoots forward over his chest to give him a taste, slick cockhead slipping inside his mouth for a tantalizing moment and then out across his lips and one rough cheek.

Gale's been so hard for so long now it feels like he could come just from that, and then Bucky is babbling, face contorted, eyes narrow and terribly wet, lips against Gale's cock, huge hands flexing on Gale's hips to make him move against Bucky's face, "I wanna make you come like you did in England, Buck, please, do you want that, I wanna take care of you right, please, Buck—"

Gale drags himself backward out of Bucky's grip and shudders out, "Yeah, okay, Bucky, let me just—" and goes to reach out for the petroleum jelly on the nightstand only for Bucky to beat him to it, scrambling up from under him before Gale can even finish his sentence.

He rolls off the bed fully, kneeling down on the floor and yanking Gale over to the edge to swallow his cock, moaning and choking at the same time as he does it, whimpering with a jerk of his chest as he pulls off. "Christ, I can't believe you're actually here," he mutters as he coats his fingers in lube and then dives back in, sucking like a fucking turbine, pulling one of Gale's thighs over his shoulder and feeling back to his hole with slippery fingers.

"It's not gonna take much, John," Gale rattles out.

Bucky pulls off his dick with a slurp, grinning with that slick tricky mouth, spit slimy in his mustache, and says, "Easy fix, Buck. We're not stopping at just once."

And so Gale laughs and lets himself fall back on the bed, folding his arm over his face, as a groan pushes through his laughter.

Bucky fingers him efficiently through his orgasm, gagging obligingly

as Gale's hips jerk, and then continues sucking with his fingers still pushing inside until Gale can't stand it anymore and drags him off and back onto the bed, where Bucky smiles at him as smug as anything, and says, "That's one."

Gale smiles back breathlessly and then looks away and pushes him down.

On their sides, they face each other, and Bucky pulls Gale's leg up over his own hip so he can get his hand back between Gale's legs as Gale reaches for Bucky's dick, strangely the most familiar part of his naked body, to jack him a few times. It's so big, he thinks, delirious, as always.

Bucky glides his fingers around Gale's hole in a sweet carress and Gale makes a noise of complaint, hips flexing away from it automatically. Bucky is not deterred nosing in for a kiss as he pulls Gale's leg farther over his body and shoves his fingers back inside. Gale's insides are disgustingly raw and swollen-feeling, but he lays there and takes it, panting.

"Can I fuck you again?" Bucky asks him then, hushed. "Would that be too much?"

Gale nods before he even thinks about it. "No, yes, yeah, come on," he blabbers, pulling at Bucky's waist to pull him on top. "I want it, come on."

So Bucky gives him what he wants, as usual, propping one of Gale's legs up over his shoulder again, pushing into him through the tumescent heat of Gale's rim, heaving in and out like a piston, giving Gale an even harder hammering than England somehow. Maybe it just feels that way after everything else.

It only takes a few minutes of it before Gale cries out and jerks again, his body convulsing so hard he pushes Bucky out, balls squeezing a few paltry drops of clear fluid out of his dick.

Bucky, wild eyed, sweet and pink and sweating, pushes his cock back inside Gale right away, while he's still twitching, and Gale sobs and says, "Wait, wait—" at the burning wave that floods through him when Bucky drops a hand to jack his soft dick at the same time.

"Too much?" Bucky asks, pausing.

Gale shakes his head, eyes closed, mindless. Every part of him

trembles. “Just don’t— Don’t touch me,” he gets out, pulling Bucky’s hand off of his cock, his voice bottoming out low in his chest as his teeth grit. “I can take it.”

Bucky goes slow anyway, pushing Gale’s legs up and apart—ankles over his head, Christ—and only fucks in a few more times, so terribly deep in him, before he pulls out again.

The contrast between Bucky being inside, heavy and stretching and hard, and emptying him out just like that makes Gale’s head spin. His wet hole feels cold in the air like it’s still open.

“Sure you aren’t down for the count there, Buck?” Bucky asks roughly, taking his dick in his own hand. “Because I can—”

“Put it back in,” Gale gasps. He puts his legs down and reaches out, scrabbling for purchase on Bucky’s waist, his ass, the back of his thigh. “Come on, John, just—”

Bucky blinks at him a couple times and then he does put it back in. He shuffles forward on his knees and props Gale’s ass up between his thighs, spreading Gale with his thumb gently to get purchase, then bending down to slide one hand up between Gale’s back and the bed.

Gale can just feel his face going all young and desperate, eyebrows pinched and eyes shiny.

“You’re shaking,” Bucky whispers as he goes in deep.

“Thought you wanted me to shake,” Gale scrapes back.

Bucky pauses, brushes his knuckles along Gale’s stubbly cheek, runs his thumb over his eyebrow and his temple and his cheekbone, looking terribly vulnerable, puffing out a difficult exhale with his mouth open.

“Buck,” he says, pushing in again, slow.

Gale’s eyes roll back and so he closes them. “Hm?”

“Buck,” Bucky begs, and so Gale looks up at him, and he’s shaking too, his dear face furiously earnest.

They’re so close. They couldn’t be closer, Bucky’s arm up behind Gale’s shoulder, tenderly cradling the back of his head, his thighs spread around and under Gale’s hips, cock way up inside him, balls

lying heavy against his ass.

“This is it,” Bucky tells him fiercely. “You and me. Me and you, Gale Cleven. You get that? You go down, I’m going down next. Every goddamn time.”

Gale huffs and tries to look away, furrowing his brows when Bucky stops him with a hand around his jaw.

“Hey, no, look at me,” he says, dipping close, thrusting in once while he stares. “I’m right here, Gale. Look at me.”

Their skin slides together with nothing but body hair and sweat between them, and Gale burns with it like a bonfire. He looks down at Bucky’s crucifix which has settled on Gale’s chest, and then finally back up to Bucky’s charming little eyes.

“There you are,” Bucky whispers. “Christ, you’re so beautiful.”

Gale’s heart aches and lurches inside his chest like an old rotten bruise. He tries to blink over his burning eyes.

“This is it,” he finally agrees, huffing a breathless laugh.

Bucky’s eyes go molten and he nods quickly a few times, and then he kisses Gale hard and fucks him harder.

Gale makes a sobbing noise he didn’t know he could make, and then he makes it again and again, muffled in Bucky’s mouth, against his cheek, his mustache, under his chin.

The position is starting to ache but the angle is getting him so good, even though it’s nearly too much to bear, even though his ass and cock and balls all feel like they’re constantly burning and tingling and coming without rest, tight and loose at the same time.

Bucky whimpers and starts going faster, breathing like an animal, burying his face in Gale’s neck.

And then Gale feels the wide stretch inside him growing and jerking and pulsing, warmth spreading up through his guts, the wet squelch of it when Bucky makes a few more jagged attempts at giving it to him.

Something has been oozing hotly out of his own dick too, but he’s too overwrought to even categorize it properly, like he came too many times for the human body to handle and now that’s all he knows how

to do.

Bucky aligns their mouths again, whimpering and whining, his free hand sliding down to feel around Gale's hole as he pulls out, for the wet gush that follows, sliding down his ass toward the bed until Bucky scrapes his fingers along Gale's crack and shoves them back up inside.

"Jesus," he gasps.

"Too much?" Bucky asks him again, voice reedy and low, face serious and yet tender, guarded and yet open. "S'that too much?"

Gale shakes his head. "I don't know," he rumbles out, clutching at Bucky's arms. "Can't go again I don't think."

"You don't have to, Buck," Bucky replies, managing to get off of him and let Gale's aching legs down finally without ever taking his fingers out of Gale's ass. He pulls Gale closer *with* the fingers inside him and Gale squirms over, reaching to hold Bucky's face between his hands, staring at him with what feels like the biggest eyes he's ever made. "You don't have to do anything," Bucky murmurs. "I'm gonna give you everything you want before you even think to ask for it."

He doesn't move his fingers, so Gale settles comfortably closer, one leg propped to the side to allow space between his legs, and kisses him. Smiling slightly, he whispers, "You gonna become some kind of mind reader?"

"If that's what it takes," Bucky says seriously, like it's a real possibility.

Gale huffs a laugh, and feels the fingers inside him distinctly when he does.

"Maybe one more," he considers, at length. "Let's just see."

"Oh, let's just *see*, he says," Bucky teases nonsensically, starting up with soft pulses inside Gale's hole, right where he's the most sensitive, pushing behind his dick, rubbing it like a stubborn stain. "You want me to suck you? Would that make it easier?"

Gale shakes his head, gives a shuddering groan that ends in a mortifying squeak and presses his face into Bucky's shoulder. "It's different," he grits out. "When it's just from inside."

Bucky's hand speeds up and breath quickens and he mutters little things like, "You're alright, Buck. I've got you. You just let yourself go,

huh?” and keeps milking him as Gale winds himself tighter and tighter into Bucky’s hold and finally manages to hit a crest that has his hips jerking forward, burning, his balls gathering up shivering and tight, his limp dick twitching against the sheets impotently. Nothing comes out.

His orgasm, such as it is, doesn’t give the same catharsis it usually would, either, leaving him still agitated and hot and like he’s at his peak, but unable to feel the wash of relief.

Even when Bucky finally leaves him be so Gale can stumble out of bed, which delights Bucky greatly, there’s no relief.

He tries to use the bathroom to get some sense of release but finds he’s too swollen and sensitive inside to do even that, giving a confused groan when he tries to push only to find himself stopped up.

Bucky, at the sink splashing water on his face, looks at him in question, and Gale gives an embarrassed laugh. “Still too worked up, I guess,” he says, tucking back into his briefs.

Bucky looks shocked for a half a second before he grins, incandescent, disgustingly pleased with himself, tongue poking out between his teeth. “Can’t walk, can’t piss,” he says, reaching out to pull Gale close to him again. “Just how are you gonna survive this thing, Buck Clevener?”

You could cut my heart out and it would still be easier than surviving without you, Gale thinks, but he clears his throat and just says, “Would you get outta my way? I’m starving,” while Bucky cackles at him.

They stare at each other for a moment, then Bucky says, “Well, I guess I’ll just have to make do with you.”

Bucky reheats the food, and they eat dinner in their underwear at his table, smiling at each other and chatting about baseball, of all things, as Bucky delightedly updates Gale on every excruciating detail of the current season that he’d missed while they were apart.

They shower together even though the shower isn’t really big enough. Bucky washes Gale’s hair and laughs when Gale splashes him. He asks Gale if he wants to wash out his hole, and then they stare at each other, helplessly turned on, when Gale honestly says no. Gale jerks Bucky off but doesn’t manage to get hard again himself, even though

Bucky does end up washing a good amount of the come out of him just by virtue of the fact he can't keep his soapy fingers to himself.

Bucky puts fresh sheets on the bed and insists that Gale choose which side he wants to sleep on, giving the distinct impression it's a decision that he'll be stuck with for a while.

Sometime later, Gale awakes and rolls over toward the heat of Bucky's body without opening his eyes. It's still dark. His ass feels tender and warm, heartbeat slowly pulsing inside.

"Mm," Bucky groans when Gale touches him. "C'mere." He pulls Gale's arm over and holds it so that he's plastered all across Bucky's back under the sheets.

The shape of him feels almost unbearably good, big and hairy and naked, a veritable furnace of sleep heat. Gale thinks about feeling it every night. He thinks about never feeling it again. He thinks about Bucky teasing him in the dark, pulling his blanket down with white knuckles, begging for a kiss in the belly of a war plane, angrily whispering love confessions like curse words, zipping his pants with trembling hands.

Gale almost missed this. He made it into this bed by the skin of his god damned teeth.

Overwhelmed with it, a terrible, wounded noise erupts from his chest. He tries to muffle the sound in Bucky's shoulder, but Bucky rolls over under his arm, saying in his scratchy morning voice, "Hey, how ya feelin'?"

Gale shakes his head, his face painfully spasming. He struggles to hold it all in, and ends up croaking, "I'm just sorry, that's all."

Bucky takes a thoughtful breath and then reaches up to comb through Gale's hair gently. "Nothin' to be sorry for, Buck." Gale manages to give him a skeptical look and Bucky smiles. "Eh," he says with a shrug. "Look around. War's over. You're in my bed in one piece. What've I got to complain about?"

Bucky's too good for him, is the God's honest truth. From the outside they've looked like an unlikely pair because Gale's the buttoned-up

do-gooder and Bucky's the crazy-eyed hedonist, but inside they're even unlikely— a gregarious, generous, brave, loyal man, warm from the inside like all mammals should be, and a husk of a person, an empty outline, who forced and faked his way into a few medals. What does someone like Bucky even want with him?

He feels himself shaking worse than he was three orgasms in.

Bucky's touch gentles even more. "Hey, now, what's all this about? You scared or somethin'?"

Gale smiles back in spite of himself, heart hammering. "John Egan, I am terrified," he replies.

They both laugh at that, incredulous at the uncharacteristic admission.

Bucky kisses him for it, feeling up his sensitive sides under the sheets. "Christ, you drive me nuts," he mutters, bullying his way forward. He nuzzles his nose along Gale's cheek, kisses his jaw. "How long can you stay?"

Gale can't wipe the dumb smile off his face. "Long as you want, I guess."

"Well, if I'd known you were movin' in I'd've cleaned up the place..." Bucky jokes.

Gale's heart blooms with hope that he immediately tamps down, scoffing as he glances over into the dark. "Alright, let me correct myself. I have to report for duty in Washington in September."

Bucky doesn't answer right away, but he pats the side of Gale's cheek to make him look up again. "Hey." His smile eases and he says, very seriously, "So we get a place in Baltimore until I can get reassigned." He holds Gale's face, something unbearably soft in his eyes. "Easy," he concludes.

Gale, soft and relaxed and still somehow on fire, laughs in disbelief. "Oh. *Easy*," he says.

"Yeah, *easy*," Bucky says, drops in to kiss him again, seemingly doing an impression of Gale doing an impression of him.

As arousal comes back around to sweep through them again, Bucky sucks Gale off in the same familiar way he used to do in England, just naked and horizontal now, warm and safe in a place where no one can

find them. He laughs and doesn't touch Gale's hole anymore after Gale gruffly tells him, "I'm never gonna be able to piss or shit again if you keep on."

And then Bucky smiles sweetly, a little shyly, and says, "You know, I tried it out again after that last time in the inn. Thought maybe I was missing out on something the way you jerked around like a fish out of water. Not as bad as I thought."

Gale gives him a dead-eyed look for the fish comment, but he gets what Bucky's angling for, and rolls over to grab the lube and slick up his fingers, reaching between the sweet valley of Bucky's thighs and resting their foreheads together as he brings him off, listening to Bucky's little whimpers juxtaposed with those low groans from deep in his chest, rolls of thunder, growling animals, earthquakes, hurricanes.

Gale and Bucky sleep huddled together under the sheets in Bucky's bedroom in Wilmington with its soft flannel blanket and gauzy white curtains over the window.

Gale wakes up once to find himself under Bucky's arm, pulsing softly in time with his soft snores, and he tries to soak it all in, not to think of anything else in the world, just to be here where he is, to carve it in stone inside his brain only to descend back into groggy, heavy morningtime sleepiness.

When he wakes again, Bucky's bristly mouth is puffing damply against Gale's shoulder, and when Gale stiffens to get up, Bucky's lips purse slightly, in some simulacrum of a kiss, even half asleep, and Gale burns like the goddamn sun.

Still, he manages to slip out of bed to open the bedroom window, taking a moment to admire the afforded view of downtown. He putters over to the bathroom for a shower, then to the kitchen to make toast and coffee, and finally he returns to bed, where he pulls up Bucky's blanket and then sits down next to him, laying a hand on his sleep-warm back.

Bucky snores one last time and then breathes deep, shudders to life, scrunching his face and emitting a crackling moan.

“Mornin’, sunshine,” Gale tells him, hand on his cheek now.

Bucky smiles up at him, lovely mouth pursing under his mustache, rolling onto his back and squinting against the light as he rubs through his chest hair absently. “I sleep in?” he croaks.

Gale softly feels along his dark hairline, chest tight as Bucky leans into his hand, overcome suddenly. “Nah,” he says through the emotion threatening to choke him up. “Woke up just in time.”

Chapter End Notes

me a lesbian: for some reason i believe love is stored in endless never ending fingering sessions idk who can never say why ☐♀☐

if you have any parts you'd like to hear my thoughts on, i'm gonna do a little 'DVD commentary' meme [over on my tumblr](#) where u will send me a clip from this fanfic and i will say things like, 'ah yes.... the prostate orgasm was a metaphor for emotional openness'

finally, if u left a comment on this fanfic, u personally got me through a few really difficult months at my job and with my family!!!!!! i literally have no words to thank u guys for the time and care and thoughtfulness you have displayed, which is why i'm dogshit at replying. thank you!!!!!!!!!!!!

anyway thank you so much for reading this, friends!!!! it's the longest thing i ever wrote and i was infected with clegan rabies the whoooooole time :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!